

THE FALL OF THE
KINGDOM
OF
NORTHUMBRIA



DR. CLIFTON WILCOX

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AUTHORS NOTE

I first heard the story of the Battle of Nechtansmere from some locals at the Ploughs Inn in Forfar, Scotland. At the time I was stationed in the United Kingdom and it was the early 1980s. A few of us decided to get away from our typical routine of driving to London or watch the horse races in Newmarket in Suffolk. This time we decided to drive north over our extended break and see what Scotland had to offer.

So, there we were enjoying a few pints of beer and a good game of darts in the quaint Ploughs Inn. We overheard the locals at the next table sharing a fascinating tale. We asked if we could join them and they agreed and we slid our table over and joined in and they began to spin the story...

It was not long after the end of World War II when a local woman on a moonlit wintry night had been walking from Brechin, returning to her home in Letham, to the south. The mix of moonlight and darkness of the night was perfect for visions just as the local woman encountered on her journey. In the dark ahead, she saw lights in the distance. She could make out that the light ahead was not from flashlights, but bear a resemblance to torchlights. As she cautiously moved closer, she, in fact, saw that figures were holding the torches. She was close enough to the figures to see the clothing that the men bearing the torches were wearing. The torchbearers were coming from the direction of Dunnichen, the site of the infamous 685 A.D. commonly known as the Battle of Nechtansmere. As she approached them she could hear them speaking. They were apparently searching for something as one of them kept kneeling down to the ground as if he was picking up something. She could faintly hear their conversation, but she could not make out the words because it was an old dialect. As she approached, the men looked up and gazed upon her. She stopped and looked away for a brief second. When her eyes return to the field where the men were standing; they were gone. All that remained was a field that seemed

untouched and the high grass gently waving in the wind.

Unsure of what she had seen or even believing that there was actually anything in that field; she began to look for an answer. Combing through history books and scanning drawings of Scottish warriors, she came across a drawing that matched what she had seen. The drawing was of Pict warriors, carrying torches searching the ground for something, perhaps the remains of their comrades who had fallen at the victorious battle.¹

There were other visions surrounding the Battle at Dunnichen, visions more closely related in time to the event. For instance, Bede in chapter 24 of his *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, tells of the vision Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, had regarding King Ecgrith of Bernicia. Cuthbert tells Ecgrith's sister Aelfflaed that her brother "happens to be in his last year with death at the gates."² Later in chapter 27 of his *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, Bede tells of how Cuthbert, upon hearing that Ecgrith was battling with the Picts, rushed to be with Ecgrith's queen in Carlisle, fearing that his prophecy to Aelfflaed was near. Upon arrival Cuthbert was being shown around the city when he was suddenly disturbed by something. Bede claims that after Cuthbert regained his bearing he whispered, "... perhaps at this moment the battle is being decided."³ After the vision, Cuthbert spoke privately with the queen and warned her that the king would probably be dead by Sunday. Cuthbert was correct in assuming that his vision was exact, for King Ecgrith was slain by the Picts at the Battle of Dunnichen on Sunday, 20 May A.D. 685.

Although the tales of the Battle of Dunnichen are fascinating and intriguing; the goal of this book is to discuss neither the battle nor the supernatural forces and visions that appeared to people either during or after the battle. The aim here is, however, to discuss the Battle of Dunnichen, which occurred in 685, as it was recorded by the ancient-medieval sources from the period. Additionally, it examines the way in which modern scholars have written about the battle and to discuss the events leading up to the battle, such as the relationship between the kingdom of the Picts and the kingdom of Northumbria. Particular attention will be given to the Northumbrian royal house of Æthelfrith, especially his grandson Ecgrith, whom partakes in the battle against King Bridei of the Picts. The medieval writer Eddius Stephanus in his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* extensively documents the reign of Ecgrith.

The importance of Æthelfrith is also discussed, since it is with his reign that the power of the Northumbrian kingdom begins to expand and exert influence over neighboring peoples. This book is confined to the seventh century, which encompasses both the Northumbrian rise to power and its eventual fall from power as it is perceived by the ancient-medieval writers of the period.

Although little is known of the actual battle, I will discuss the recent historiography of the events in order to reconstruct the battle scene and its immediate outcome in terms of the realignment of the border between the two kingdoms. Additionally, it will also provide a better understanding of the pivotal pieces of land that provide a gateway into Pictland, such as the modern day Edinburgh and Stirling. Most importantly is the discussion framing the outcome of the battle and the impact it had on both southern Pictland and Northumbria as it is viewed by the ancient-medieval texts and the modern historians.

The Battle of Dunnichen was an important battle for both the history of Pictland and the future of Scotland. The defeat of the Northumbrians defined the southern Scottish and northern English border forever and allowed the southern Picts the ability to regain their autonomy.

CHAPTER ONE

Development of Anglo-Saxon Kingship

The warlords who led the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians, and other Germanic tribesmen into Roman Britain during the *adventus Saxonum* of the fifth century were, above all, military figures.¹ In the generations to come, as the Anglo-Saxons set up kingdoms in Kent, Essex, Mercia, Northumbria, and other regions of Britain, their descendants claimed legitimate, hereditary power.² Anglo-Saxon kingship was, as historian Joel Rosenthal observes, not an idealized or abstract concept: it was an institution by, of, and about power.³ This institution of power is what this book is about. It will explore several facets of royal power among the Anglo-Saxons, circa 400 to 900 AD. Among these facets are the king's role in warfare and military systems, the economics of kingship, the spiritual/sacral connections of kings, and their relation to the existing and developing authority structures. As H. R. Loyn argues, the intensity of royal control was dependent on a delicate balance of military and religious prestige and the ability to exact permanent tribute.⁴

To understand power and the state we will need to examine the role of military, economic, and religious royal power in early medieval England, and how that royal power was the key element in the formation of the Anglo-Saxon state in the last century. It concludes that the kingdom of Wessex, particularly under Alfred the Great (r. 871-899) and his tenth-century heirs, was among the earliest medieval kingdoms in Britain that can safely be called a state.

The development of Anglo-Saxon kingship and the formation of an Anglo-Saxon state did not occur in a vacuum. The origins of the state lie in an era of extreme political instability for much of Britain. This was not a new problem; parts the island had been under the control of various groups for hundreds of years. These groups included the Romans as well as various Celtic and

Germanic peoples. The island of Britain was always at the extremes of Roman reach. During his Gallic Wars in 55 and 54 BC, Julius Caesar twice attempted to invade the island.⁶ Though he did not occupy the island; he brought it within the Roman sphere of interest. His first-century AD successor Claudius renewed the attempt at conquest, finally transforming Britain from client state and trading partner to part of the Empire, and indeed to what Peter Hunter Blair calls, with perhaps some degree of exaggeration, one of the most important of the imperial provinces.⁷

For decades after the conquest, Roman governors and legions fought frequent British rebellions. Early in his career, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, father-in-law of famous first and second-century Roman ethnographer/historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus, learned his first lessons in military life in Britain serving under Publius Suetonius Paulinus.⁸ Tacitus says of the period that Britain had never before or since been in a more disturbed state. Veterans had been massacred, colony burned down, and armies cut off. They had to fight for their lives first, before they could think of victory. The most famous of these skirmishes was the defeat of Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, and her force of allied Britons by Paulinus at Watling Street in Boudicca waged by his superior.⁹

Despite Roman problems with indigenous tribes and despite the island's location on the fringe the Empire, Britannia became an economically thriving region of the empire over the next three-and-a-half centuries.¹⁰ In the early fourth century, however, the Empire's myriad troubles spelled doom not only for the continent, but also for Roman control of Britain as well. In the opening years of the century, barbarian incursions were a constant threat throughout the Empire. The Huns, a nomadic peoples from the steppes of Central Asia, had been moving steadily westward for years, pushing smaller Germanic tribes ahead of them and, eventually, across the Empire's *limes* (a border fortification system of the Roman Empire). While Roman Britain dealt with raids by Picts from the north and the *Scotti* (i.e., the Irish) from the west, the continental areas of the Empire faced the seemingly unending migrations of Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Alans, Huns and others.¹¹ The legions in Britain, protectors of not only the Romans of the island but also of *Romanitas* — the entire Roman way of life — were already stretched thin, and further unfortunate events

that transpired in AD 410 left the Romano-British peoples undefended.

In that year, the Eternal City fell to Alaric of the Visigoths, the first such event in 800 years, leaving its citizens in a state of shock and dismay. Christian reaction from across the Empire was particularly strong. In one part of the Empire, an African bishop felt compelled to write a monumental theological tract in defense of Christianity in answer to the charge by pagan Romans that religion itself was the cause of the calamity.¹² Far to the east, another church father, in Palestine at the time, wrote in the prefaces to his commentary on *Ezekiel* that:

The brightest light of the whole world is extinguished; indeed the head has been cut from the Roman Empire. To put it more truthfully, the whole world has died with one City.

Who would have believed that Rome, which was built up from victories over the whole world, would fall; so that it would be both the mother and the tomb to all peoples.¹³

That was not the only setback for the Roman Empire during the year; for many years warfare both civil and foreign had spread the Roman military across the empire.

Roman legions, including what troops yet remained in Britain after Constantine III declared himself emperor and departed for the continent, withdrew from the periphery toward the center.¹⁴ In Britain, remaining leaders, dealing with attacks not just by Picts and Irish but probably now by Saxons from the continent,¹⁵ sent a final plea to Emperor Honorius in 410.¹⁶ In his famous rescript, the emperor replied to the cities of Britain that they should see to their own defense.¹⁷ According to Zosimus, a Byzantine historian of the following century, —Honorius [. . .] wrote letters to the cities in Britain urging them to be on their guard.¹⁸ Gildas says that the Romans ordered that the British should stand alone, get used to arms, fight bravely, and defend with all their power their land, property, wives, children, and, more importantly, their life and liberty.

Obviously, imperial help would not be forthcoming. Theodor Mommsen perhaps said it best: “It was not Britain that gave up Rome, but Rome that gave up Britain.”¹⁹ In response to the lack of help from Rome, the native wretched inhabitants of Britain looked again outside their boundaries for assistance:

Then all the members of the council, together with their proud tyrant [*—cum superbo tyranno*], were struck blind; the guard – or rather the method of destruction – they devised for our land was the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God, should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the north.²⁰

All, including their King Vortigern, agreed that they should call the Saxons to their aid from across the seas. As events plainly showed, this was ordained by the will of God so that evil might fall upon those miscreants.²¹

The Saxons, apparently not content to remain mercenaries protecting the Britons from their fellow Celts from the north and west, soon turned on their employers. This was the era of the historical Arthur, if such a man existed, and of the slightly more historical Ambrosius Aurelianus. Aurelianus was, according to Gildas, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this noticeable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it.²² It seems from the evidence that he was likely a Roman-British son of Roman aristocrats or even of an emperor, though it seems possible that the reference to his parents (*parentes*, which can also mean — relatives) wearing the purple in fact refers to other ancestors bearing the *nomen* Aurelius. ²³ According to the sources, the Britons under Aurelianus and an English force, comprised of armies of Kent, South Saxons, and West Saxons all under the command of Ælle of Sussex, met at the now lost battlefield of Mount Badon (*Mons Badonicus*) around the turn of the sixth century, with the Britons emerging victorious.²⁴ But in the end, despite this victory, the native Britons were unable to force a permanent retreat.

For much of the sixth century, a chaotic pattern of violence seems to have existed. Anglo-Saxon groupings fought with each other while simultaneously fighting the remaining native Britons, both in the west and the north. Kings like Ælle of Sussex, commander at Mount Badon, and Caelin of Wessex campaigned against the Britons throughout the southern and eastern parts of the island, leaving only the western and northern sections under the control of Celtic kingdoms.²⁵ Moreover, the territories won earlier by the Anglo-Saxons continued to grow during the sixth

and seventh centuries into the major Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of a later period.

Primary sources suggest that the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom to form in Britain was that of Kent, in the southeastern portion of the island. Annals of the seventh century are thought to be preserved in later documents, and law codes of the seventh century (of Aethelberht, Hlothere and Eadric, and Wihtred) show the Kentish state in operation earlier than any other English kingdom.²⁶ Archaeological and place-name evidence supports Nicholas Brooks conclusion that Kent was, in fact, a kingdom with its origins in the Celtic Iron Age, surviving as a Roman *civitas* with a capital at *Durovernum Cantiacorum* (i.e., Canterbury).²⁷ Indeed, the name was known even in the fourth century BC by Greek explorer and geographer Pytheas, as well as to Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Ptolemy, Julius Caesar, and all the way down to Bede himself. According to that venerable historian, along with the authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Historia Britonnum*, it was said that the first Anglo-Saxon rulers of Kent were Hengist and Horsa.²⁸ The genealogy provided by Bede traces their ancestry back to Woden, and later follows the line of Hengist's progeny through his son Oeric Oisc down to Aethelberht.²⁹ Aethelberht was, famously, the king to whom Gregory the Great sent the missionary St. Augustine (sometimes called —the Less), and who allowed the Christian to set up a center of worship in the Kentish capital city of Canterbury.³⁰

Among the South Saxons, less reliable information is extant. No regnal lists exist, but written information does appear in Bede, in the *vita* of St. Wilfrid, and, perhaps most importantly, in the Tribal Hidage.³¹ Evidence seems to support the idea that the kingdom was divided into two subkingdoms.³² For the West Saxons, also known as the Gewisse, the two earliest leaders described by Bede and the *Chronicle* are Cerdic and Cynric. Here, however, we see for the first time a particular problem in determining the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Namely, the foundations myths are often just that - myths. Like Hengist and Horsa, the alliteratively named kinsmen Cerdic and Cynric are part of a general cycle of legends that exist throughout the Indo-European world. Indeed, even the *Chronicle* is never clear on their arrival or deeds.³³

On 495: In this year two chieftains, Cerdic and his son Cynric, came with five ships to Britain at the place which is called *Cerdicesora*, and they fought against the Britons on the same day. [In the sixth year after their arrival they conquered the western part of Britain which is now called Wessex [...].³⁴

On 508: In this year Cerdic and Cynric killed a British king [...].³⁵

On 514: In this year the West Saxons came into Britain with three ships at the place which is called *Cerdicesora* [...].³⁶

On 519: In this year Cerdic and Cynric succeeded to the kingdom [of the West Saxons].³⁷

The Chronicler seems to be using various sources that do not quite agree on the chronology, but all play into the same form: two men arrive in their new area in a few ships, defeat the ruling king, and then take the area for themselves.³⁸ Otherwise, the story would indicate that Cerdic and Cynric arrived in England, defeated a British king, and then took over ruler ship of a new shipment of West Saxon invaders some twenty-four years after they arrived with their own five ships.³⁹

Among the invaders in the north, Ida became the first King of the Northumbrian Angles starting in the middle of the sixth century.⁴⁰ Like Hengist and Horsa and others, Ida was (according to the *Chronicle*, s. a. 547) the descendent of Woden.⁴¹ Æthelfrith, grandson of Ida, succeeded to the kingdom of Bernicia in 593. In the waning years of the sixth century (circa 598), Æthelfrith conducted a major campaign for control of the north, culminating in a disastrous defeat of combined Celtic forces at the Battle of Catraeth or Catterick.⁴² An anonymously composed elegiac poem known as —*V Gododdin*, sometimes incorrectly attributed to the bard Aneirin, commemorates the heroics of Celtic warriors from the battle and, like the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, provides insight into the warrior culture of the era. According to the *Chronicle*, Æthelfrith again met a Dál Riadan force under the leadership of Áedán mac Gabráin, the King of the Scots, at Degsastan in 603.⁴³ There Áedán was defeated and almost all of his army was slain. No King of the Scots dared afterwards lead an army against this nation. With the defeat of Dál Riada at Degsastan, organized Celtic power in England was severely curtailed.

In the following decades, Æthelfrith gained control of the rival sub-kingdom Deira, exiling its former royal line to Ireland. After Æthelfrith's death (c. 616), Edwin and the Deiran line returned from exile, only to be supplanted by Oswald from 634 to 642.⁴⁴ Oswald, importantly, was also one of Bede's seven kings who held power over all the southern kingdoms of England, joining the esteemed ranks of Ælle, Caelin, and Æthelberht.⁴⁵ In what editors Judith McClure and Roger Collins call a famous but notorious passage, Bede asserts:

The first king to hold the like sovereignty was Ælle, king of the South Saxons; the second was Caelin, king of the West Saxons, known in their own language as Ceawlin; the third, as we have said, was Æthelberht, king of Kent; the fourth was Raedwald, king of the East Angles, who even during the lifetime of Æthelberht was gaining the leadership for his own race; the fifth was Edwin, king of the Northumbrians, the nation inhabiting the district north of the Humber. [. . .] The sixth to rule within the same bounds was Oswald, the most Christian king of the Northumbrians, while the seventh was his brother Oswiu who for a time held almost the same territory.⁴⁶

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in one manuscript, follows the same list, calling the office that of the *bretwalda*.⁴⁷ Debate over the characteristics and even existence of such an institution have risen, but it suffices to say that the very existence of such powerful kings ruling so vast a territory is, if accurate, a significant event of the sixth and seventh centuries.

The history of the seventh and eighth centuries in England is a history of territorial expansion, contraction, and amalgamation. A traditional interpretation, originating from Henry of Huntingdon's twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum*, is that England during this period was dominated by the *heptarchy*, the island's seven most powerful kingdoms.⁴⁸ Most interpretations included the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Kent, East Anglia, Essex, Sussex and Wessex.⁴⁹ That is not to say, however, that these were the only kingdoms; smaller groups like the kingdom of the Hwicce, Lindsey, Middlesex, Magonsæte, and so on, are still known through various primary sources, and the idea of the *heptarchy* has lost much ground historiographically.⁵⁰ David Dumville goes so

far as to assert that no two scholars are likely to agree upon not just the members of the heptarchy, but the number of dominant kingdoms in general.⁵¹ Regardless of the accuracy of that term, however, there are clearly four most powerful kingdoms in the period: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, and Wessex.⁵² Each has a long and complex royal history.

The terms *power* and *state* have become buzzwords in modern society, their meanings obscured by repetitive usage. In the interest of composing a coherent argument, it seems best to define them anew. The following seeks to establish definitions for the terms through the application of the scientific conclusions of scholars coming primarily from the fields of sociology and political anthropology. The formation of precise definitions to be used throughout the thesis allows for a clear starting point to an argument.

Defining Power

To modern ears, the word —power seems to be an irritatingly vague term. Nor is the venerable Oxford English Dictionary initially as helpful as one might hope since its definition is somewhat noncommittal: power is the *ability to act or affect something strongly, or is perhaps control or authority over others*.⁵³ More pragmatically, the Oxford English Dictionary also suggests that power could mean the *capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of others*.⁵⁴ Sociologist Michael Mann defines it more specifically as the ability to pursue and attain goals through the mastery of one's environment.⁵⁵ He further specifies, following Talcott Parsons, that *social* power carries two more specific senses: power over other people, otherwise known as *distributive* power, as well as *collective* power, whereby persons in cooperation can enhance their joint power over third parties or over nature.⁵⁶ Father of sociology Karl Emil Maximilian —Max Weber describes power in general in this distributive sense; he says that *power*:

(*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance. The present work, arguing for the role of royal power in building the Anglo-Saxon state, is primarily concerned with a king's *distributive* power, although the use of collective power in securing the future of the state will

become evident in later sections.⁵⁷

The greatest theoretical difference between modern scholars is not necessarily their definitions of the term power but rather their opinions as to *what the sources or types of power are*. Political scientists Lasswell and Kaplan cited ideational bases of (political) power, which Donald Kurtz designates as power itself (an ambiguous redundancy), respect, rectitude, affection, well-being, wealth, skill, and enlightenment.⁵⁸ Dahl, on the other hand, cites more materialistic sources: social standing; distributions of cash, wealth and credit; access to legal means; popularity; control over jobs; and information.⁵⁹ These two sets of characteristics are, to me, too situational and specific. John R. P. French, Jr, and Bertram Raven proposed in their 1959 essay *The Bases of Social Power* that there are five bases of power, and their bases are more general. (In their nomenclature, O is the social agent possessing power, and P the person whom O influences).⁶⁰

These five bases of O's power are: (1) reward power, based on P's perception that O has the ability to mediate rewards for him; (2) coercive power, based on O's perception that O has the ability to mediate punishments for him; (3) legitimate power, based on the perception by P that O has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for him; (4) referent power, based on P's identification with O; (5) expert power, based on the perception that O has some special knowledge or expertness.⁶¹

A slightly better known theoretician of power (or, specifically, authority) is Max Weber. In his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in English as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber outlines his sociological theory and, most usefully for the present work, defines power and authority.⁶² He also lists three pure foundations of legitimate authority:

1.
Rational grounds—resting on a belief in the legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).
- 2.

Traditional grounds—resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally,

3.

Charismatic grounds—resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).⁶³

Weber himself is the first to admit that, in historical cases, each of these three rarely appears in its pure form or in isolation. That said, his conceptual formulation is nevertheless useful.

In order to illustrate I use the model set forth by Michael Mann in his 1986 book, *The Sources of Social Power*. In this seminal work, Mann proposes a system of four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political.⁶⁴ *Ideological power* is perhaps the most complicated of the four sources. It involves, Mann says, three different interrelated arguments: the concepts and categories of *meaning* imposed upon sense perception (i.e., through social organization of knowledge); the creation of *norms* (shared understandings of how people should act... in their relations with each other); and *aesthetic/ritual practices*.⁶⁵ Mann owes somewhat of a debt to French sociologists Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu. Mann himself cites Durkheim's assertion that shared normative understandings [like religion] are required for stable, efficient social cooperation.⁶⁶ Bourdieu, particularly interested in symbolic power, is the father of the similar sociological concept called the *habitus*. The habitus, in the words of editor John B. Thompson, is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways.⁶⁷ Like Mann's norms, the habitus is not determined by law but develops through the inculcation of members of a society, and therein becomes second nature based on social upbringing.⁶⁸ Development and control of the norms of a society that is, defining the habitus is the key source of ideological power. Later we will see that aesthetic and ritual practices will also be important, not in small part because the kings of early medieval northern Europe knew the value of public displays of ritual power to further legitimize their rule.

Compared to ideological power, Mann's economic and military power are much simpler conceptually. *Military power* is concerned with the necessity of organized physical defense and its usefulness for aggression.⁶⁹ Military organization, a *concentrated-coercive* form of power, deals with violence, the most concentrated, if bluntest, instrument of human power. But it not only applies to a local area; military power gives control over a local area, but also provides what Mann calls a terroristic power, the extensive penumbra of the threat of violence over a larger periphery outside the core.⁷⁰ *Economic power*, in Mann's somewhat convoluted terms, derives from the satisfaction of subsistence needs through the social organization of the extraction, transformation, distribution, and consumption of the objects of nature.⁷¹ Essentially, economic power is that which is derived from controlling every aspect of material wealth be it foods, goods, or gold from its origins to its ends. *Political power*, perhaps the least common in the earlier years of Anglo-Saxon England, is that power derived from the usefulness of centralized, institutionalized, territorialized regulation of many aspect of social relations.⁷² Unhelpfully for current work, he further defines it as *state power*.⁷³ Political power is, thus, that kind of power used to create and regulate the bureaucracies and hierarchies of states. It is this political power that kings, and especially Alfred, sought to gain in the later centuries of Anglo-Saxon dominance in England. Mann's theory admittedly can only encompass some of [human societies'] broadest goals.⁷⁴

The creation of a state system may be, arguably, one of these broad goals. His theory, combined with that of Weber, undergirds the present approach. Weber's three types of authority fit well within the framework established by Mann. Ideological power and political power in particular seem to gain their teeth from charismatic and, to a lesser extent, traditional and legal authority. Mann's other types of power — military and economic — do not necessarily fit within Weber's paradigm because Weber describes *authority*, which has the connotation of power based on recognized/legitimate right.⁷⁵ While ideological power and to some extent political power, which can be seen as more abstract concepts, seem to require some source of legitimacy, military and economic power do not need this legitimating source and can in fact stand on their own. In the nomenclature of French and Raven described above, O's ability to control P via military or economic

means does not require that P recognize a *legitimate* right by O to do so; he only recognizes that O's military/economic power makes it so that P should obey his dictates lest P be punished militarily or economically. (Call this perhaps —legitimation by fear, if it is really legitimation at all.) With these ideas of the nature and sources of power in mind, one must now ask another theoretical question: What is the state?

Defining the State

In *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates describe the origins of the state thus:

A State [...] arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants... Then, as we have many wants, and many persons are needed to supply them, one takes a helper for one purpose and another for another; and when these partners and helpers are gathered together in one habitation the body of inhabitants is termed a state.⁷⁶

A broad definition, for sure, but at its core it is a compelling argument: the state is the collection of humans working together to meet each individual's wants. The Italian thinker Marsilius of Padua (c. 1275-1342) wrote that, since man enters life defenseless against the outside world, he requires a large number of men to assure his safety as well as to protect the group from excessive wrongdoers as well as other individuals both within and outside the state who disturb or attempt to oppress the community.⁷⁷ Like Plato's, Marsilius's state is a collection of men organized for the benefit of the individuals who make it up, providing for both their wants and their need for security. One historiographical school sees states as the extension of the idea of the nation as a natural community which exists whether or not it is embodied in the governmental fact of a state.⁷⁸ The problem, however, lies in the assessment of nations as natural divisions of men. The boundaries of culture are, as Reynolds claims, hard to define, and the concept of the nation itself is a label created by men.⁷⁹ Because of these difficulties, we will not seek to define the concept of the nation, and focus only on broad cultural groups that while internally heterogeneous, exhibit significant similarities.

The argument that royal power was critical in the formation of

an Anglo-Saxon state in the early middle ages necessarily makes many assumptions about the nature of the state. It is not concerned with some ideal of the state, but with the definition of what a *historical* state is, as well as the nature of its development in Anglo-Saxon England. That is not, however, to say that the state only encompasses a small, rigidly defined set of specific groups. This term too, like nation, is, admittedly, a label, carrying with it all of the problems that arise from assigning labels to structures created by man. It is, nonetheless, a *useful* label. To use the term with clarity, however, requires that one draw upon relevant research from the fields of political theory, political anthropology, and sociology.

Answering the question —What is the state? is certainly a more difficult task than Plato or Marsilius would have us believe. Political scientist Charles H. Titus, writing in 1931, declared that a cursory examination of the term reveals no fewer than one hundred forty-five different definitions.⁸⁰ Certainly this number must be much higher today. Ronald Cohen, in assessing the problems of defining the state, explains that humans, inherently social creatures, all live within some form of social order, but that we incorrectly equate all political forms, with their variations in power, authority, structure, and values, as being equivalent to the state.⁸¹ Instead, he concludes, the state and society are not synonymous. Martin van Creveld has further argued this in vein. In *The Rise and Decline of the State*, he argues that is an abstract entity which can be neither seen, nor heard, nor touched.⁸² It is, he claims, not identical with the rulers or the ruled, and instead possesses a legal *persona* of its own, which means that it has rights and duties and may engage in various activities as if it were a real, flesh-and-blood, living individual.⁸³ The state is not the institution ruled over by a particular leader, but the institution that ruler happens to govern.

According to Joseph R. Strayer, whose *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* is essential reading for those investigating the nature of the state in the middle ages that most attempts to define the state have been very unsatisfactory.⁸⁴ Many states, he argues, do not meet the definitions political scientists impose, and thus developing a strict definition is not a particularly fruitful methodology. (His lack of faith in the methodology of definition does not, however, stop him from defining the state with his own

particular characteristics.)⁸⁵ Cohen agrees, and he himself recognizes that simply finding traits common to states of various locations and historical periods is insufficient. Very few traits could apply to more than a small sample of states without automatically disregarding others that certainly merit the label.⁸⁶ Regardless, some themes and characteristics can signify the emergence or existence of a state level of society.

From an anthropological point of view, the development of the state is part of an evolutionary model in which the state itself exists on a spectrum somewhere between earlier non-state groups and the modern national state.⁸⁷ Anthropologists and theoreticians, though, have come to many different conclusions about the spectrum itself. Arguably the most famous models, and those used as a theoretical framework for the evolution of political systems in the present thesis, are those by Elman R. Service and Morton Fried. Service's model argues for four levels of society: bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states.⁸⁸ His four levels, used by many anthropologists to distinguish between not only different political structures but also between ethnographic types of societies, is clearly an evolutionary model. Bands and tribes, the least advanced political systems, have no central authority or power structure, and instead these ideas are coterminous with their social structure as a whole or, in the case of tribes, with their kinship structure. Chiefdoms display a more formal political structure with leaders and governments. They also display a decrease in overall social equality, with the development of a ranked hierarchy of elites. The leaders of states, unlike those of chiefdoms, have the force of law to back up their authority, or barring that, the military force to retain power.

Morton Fried, in *The Evolution of Political Society*, proposed his own model arguing that societies exist in a series of three types: egalitarian, ranked, and stratified societies.⁸⁹ He owes much to Marxism, and Cohen himself calls Fried the most widely cited Western scholar to espouse the Marxist belief of the state as the ruling class's instrument for maintaining control.⁹⁰ These leanings do not necessarily discredit his theory, though, and his model does not necessarily preclude Service's. As Donald Kurtz explains, bands and some tribes are egalitarian, tribes with leaders and chiefdoms are ranked and complex chiefdoms and all states are stratified societies.⁹¹ As in Service's model, social and economic

standing (and particularly the decline of equality in these fields) are the indicators of a more highly evolved political structure. Though economic inequality is by no means the *only* factor in defining the state, the view that the state exists as a stratified society with central governmental system (and, in most cases, a single political leader) supported by a strata of political/social/economic elites seems most nearly correct.

Where Fried and Service differ in their theory is in defining the impetus for state formation: conflict or consensus. Historian/theoretician Peter Burke calls this the *evolutionary versus revolutionary* models of social change.⁹² Anthropologist Robert Carneiro argues that the models come from two ideological camps. Some scholars follow coercive theories, where state formation is the result of force, not enlightened self-interest. Others favor voluntaristic theories, wherein historical peoples spontaneously, rationally, and voluntarily gave up their individual sovereignties and united with other communities to form a larger political unit deserving to be called a state.⁹³ But the dichotomy is a false one; no good scholar would refuse to see the relevancy of the opposing camp's views. The two viewpoints are instead paradigms for thinking about the nature of history in general. For those scholars who favor conflict (or revolutionary, or coercive) theory, the competition between societies (or segments of societies) for control of resources eventually leads to the creation of one dominant party that then must fight to maintain and protect its new, now stratified system. Fried, the good Marxist, argues that this economic competition is the key impetus for the state.⁹⁴

Carneiro's circumscription theory explains the formation of state as the outcome of a regular and determinate cultural process with competition for resources (and the warfare it causes) playing the most decisive role in the creation of states.⁹⁵ On the opposite side of the debate are those Cohen labels them *integrationists* who argue that, despite the countless conflicts inherent in state formation, the key to state formation itself is through the widespread coordination and organization of, and recognition by, large numbers of people, often of different ethnic and ecological backgrounds.⁹⁶ Echoing the words of Burke, the state comes about by the relatively peaceful evolution of social structures, not by catastrophic revolution. Here we can walk the middle ground

between these ideologically opposed viewpoints, arguing that *conflict provides the motivation for and origin of state formation, while consensus provides the method through which states maintain their stability.*

Having concluded that there are no traits that link *all* states, I believe there are general characteristics of the state that are useful in assessing the validity of Anglo-Saxon England in the ninth and tenth centuries as a state. Strayer says that a state exists chiefly in the hearts and minds of the people; if they do not believe it is there, no logical exercise will bring it to life.⁹⁷ This characteristic seems a good starting point in finding the origin of the state; that is, a state cannot exist as such *until* it has people living under it and acknowledging its power. A corollary I would propose, however, is that the people living under the state do not necessarily have to recognize it as a particular political system. Especially for pre-modern peoples, it is enough that they at minimum recognize *the authority* of the political organization.

Strayer also proposes that states must persist in time and space in a geographical core region for a long enough time (he suggests several generations) to gain prestige and authority.⁹⁸ Less complex societies (call them bands or tribes or egalitarian societies) must be able to *literally* survive long enough to develop the agricultural, political, and perhaps even religious/ideological tools to develop into the stratified society of a chiefdom or state. As a part of this development, a society must also create permanent institutions and, in particular, “impersonal [. . .] political institutions that can survive changes in leadership, increase the efficiency of the political process, and effectively support the political system whence they evolved.”⁹⁹ The emphasis on *impersonal* institutions is of particular importance in the evolution from Germanic tribalism to the later Anglo-Saxon state, and for England, perhaps the most important institutions are those of the free armed men and the Christian Church. Although the later was not an English invention, it did fulfill many of the requirements of impersonal institution and assisted in the creation of the Anglo-Saxon state.

Strayer further argues that the state needs not only prestige but also authority. Indeed, he says that it is a characteristic of the state that its citizens first even recognize the *need* for a final authority. This perhaps may be too simple. Surely peoples living in chiefdoms, if not tribes, recognize the need for final authority,

though they might find it in sources other than the state system. The chiefdoms of the Iron Age Celts, for instance, relied on their Druids as final arbiters and judges, with even kings themselves taking their advice and subject to their injunctions.¹⁰⁰ In other areas, such as Republican Rome, the head of a household or clan (*pater familias*) might exist as the final authority on all household matters, regardless of that society's stateness.

On this subject of authority, Strayer seems to ignore one of the more famous characteristics of the state. In *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber argued that an (or perhaps *the*) essential characteristic of the state is a monopoly on violence (German: *Gewaltmonopol des Staates*).¹⁰¹ The monopoly on the legitimate use of violence or force is one thing, Weber says, that defines the state, with its citizens recognizing the authority of the state to use such force. Though not the sole defining characteristic of the state; the high medieval Church was not exactly a traditional state but enjoyed something close to a monopoly on legitimate violence through its definition of just war; and it is one that makes up an important aspect of the power and authority of the state. Nineteenth century political philosopher Ágost Pulszky further expanded on this idea of the state's control of force. The state, he said, is properly a law-creating and law-maintaining society which is further able to enforce its laws through commanding, permissive, and prohibitory rules.¹⁰² It is, in the words of Martin Sicker, a corporate structure that is the locus of political authority and has control over an effective force monopoly to assume compliance with its decisions.¹⁰³

Strayer's final qualification of the state, the one he calls the most important [. . .] and most nebulous of our tests, is a shift in loyalty from family to state.¹⁰⁴ This shift neatly coincides with the development of impersonal institutions characteristic of the state mentioned previously. This idea of a shift from kin/ethnic loyalty to state loyalty also figures in Robert Carneiro's *Theory of the Origin of the State*, where he argues that the state is an autonomous political unit with a central government that nevertheless [encompasses] many communities within its territory.¹⁰⁵ Susan Reynolds has also argued for this as a characteristic of the state in the middle ages specifically. She asserts that early medieval kingdoms and city-states were political communities that tended to develop an ethnic consciousness that

transcended local differences of custom and sometimes ignored differences of languages.¹⁰⁶ Anglo-Saxon England is perhaps the best example of this. The current theory of Anglo-Saxon dominance over the surviving Celtic or Romano-Celtic peoples of Britain hinges on the idea of elite transfer, with some scholars suggesting an apartheid-like social system in which the upper classes, though of diverse ethnic backgrounds, adopted a new Germanic, *Anglo-Saxon* culture in order to achieve higher reproductive success and/or simply to maintain a higher social position.¹⁰⁷

The shift away from family/kin loyalty is also related to the definition (or at least characteristic) put forth by several scholars over the past two centuries (including Service), wherein the state is a hierarchical system in which local political units lose their autonomy and instead function as small components of the larger authority.¹⁰⁸ More specifically, Cohen and the other scholars included in Cohen and Service's *Origins of the State* argue that the state is that type of hierarchically organized polity in which there are three or more levels of hierarchy from the center of the system to its peripheries, and one that has the stability to withstand the disruptive effects of succession.¹⁰⁹ The Anglo-Saxon *wergild*, with its various prices for people of different social strata (i.e., the king at the top, down through his ealdormen and thegns, and finally to bondsmen and slaves) and the establishment of reeves and other judicial figures to administer the king's law are certainly examples of this hierarchy. Even military organization and the rise of the Church in England display facets of this new system.

In a conference in the autumn of 1992, the School of American Research seminar participants suggested the following as a way to divide rank societies (including chiefdoms) from states:

Suggestions included (1) a change in the settlement hierarchy from three to four levels; (2) a change in the decision-making hierarchy from two to three (or more) levels; (3) a fundamental change in the ideology of stratification and descent, such that rulers were conceded a sacred supernatural origin; (5) the evolution of the palace as the ruler's official resident; (6) the change from a single centralized leader (e.g., a chief) to a government that employed legal force while denying its citizens the use of personal, individual force; and (7) the establishment of governmental laws and the ability to

enforce them.¹¹⁰

Though the seminar focused on archaic states (e.g., those of ancient Mesopotamia and Central/South America), several of the characteristics described by participants are worthwhile for examining later states. In particular, the growth of hierarchies (of any type) corresponds with conclusions mentioned previously. Other traits, though they certainly apply to Anglo-Saxon England, do not necessarily seem to imply a change from chiefdom to state; the leaders of early Germanic communities, for instance, certainly more tribes or chiefdoms than states, might claim a supernatural origin and have followers believe it.¹¹¹ Though many of these traits (such as the evolution of the palace) are not specific to the state, they are somewhat indicative of the increased power to which the state has access.

In the end, the definition of the state that we will endorse is this: Above all, a state is a stratified, hierarchical society, usually with three or more levels within that hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy is, in most cases, a king or ruler, backed by a noble elite class, who rules not only through kinship or loyalty ties but also through legal (and other) means. The hierarchy further breaks up regional and local loyalty, with smaller units of organization existing as sub-sets of the larger whole. As part of this system, states often integrate multi-ethnic (or at least somewhat diverse) populations into a single unified polity. States must also endure in their territory for an extended period, with the ability to withstand succession (or other) crises. While doing so, they must create a system of lasting, impersonal institutions for protecting the stability and authority of the state and its leaders. These institutions might include legal, military, economic, or religious ones. Carneiro further adds that the power to collect taxes, draft men for work or war, and decree and enforce laws is reserved for the state alone.¹¹² The state itself also enjoys, as Weber says, a monopoly on (legitimate) violence, considering unregulated violence by its citizens an aberration. The use of violence and conflict is not solely responsible for the creation of the state, however, and a combination of conflict (to coalesce the state) and consensus (to ensure its survival as a whole) is necessary for the creation of a *lasting* state.

CHAPTER TWO

Roman and Post-Roman Era

In order to study the extent of the authority wielded by the rulers of Northumbria, one must understand the geography and politics of northern Britain. It is, therefore, imperative to have some grasp of the geographical regions of medieval Northumberland. This chapter introduces the early geography of the region during the post-Roman era.¹

Old British tribal kingdoms rose anew alongside the Anglian new-comers to Northumberland in the fourth and fifth centuries. Here we follow the development of the Anglian kingdoms and their relationships with the neighboring kingdoms. British rivalry with the Picts to their north and then with the Angles who settled amidst the British shaped the territories of the fifth and sixth century northern kingdoms. By the eighth century Northumberland was dominated by a line of Anglian kings who oversaw alliances with the Angle and Saxon kings south of the Humber River. Bede used the Latin term *imperium*, which is *bretwalda* in Old English, to describe the vast authority of these powerful kings and the changes that occurred over time to the boundaries of Northumbria due to border wars.²

Northumberland can be variously defined over its long history in terms of political authority, as well as natural and military boundaries. According to Bede, beginning sometime between the winter of 406 and 410, and continuing throughout the fifth century, numerous fleets of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes landed in Britain.³ These warrior bands forayed inland and ultimately warred with the native British for control of land on which to settle. Eventually Angles settled along the eastern coastline in what became East Anglia and Mercia, as well as north of the Humber River; while Saxons created the southern kingdoms of Wessex, Sussex, and Essex, and the Jutes were the probable founders of the southeastern kingdom of Kent.⁴

Anglian kingdoms were forged in Northumberland during the sixth century.⁵ These kingdoms emerged in a border region which had recently survived the evacuation of Roman legions and government. The British (Welsh) kingdoms reclaimed control of Britain from the Romans, and along with the northern Pict kingdoms, were the local authorities with whom the Angles first clashed.⁶ The Picts were untouched by Roman imperialism, having never been conquered by their legions. The Britons were Romanized Christian Celts, native to Britain and survivors of the Roman imperial period. The Scots of Dál Riada also later posed a threat to the Anglian kingdoms, following their ninth-century absorption of the southern Pictish kingdoms north of the Firth of Forth.⁷ The *Scoti* were Christian Celts whose kings and followers migrated from the Dál Riada region of southeastern Ireland. The Scots and Britons followed the Celtic Church rites and maintained close ties to Iona and the holy men there.⁸

From the sixth century onwards the Britons, Picts, and Scots formed alternating alliances against the Angles of Northumberland and with them against outside threats, such as Wessex, Norway, and Denmark.⁹ The Saxon kings from Wessex repeatedly attempted to control the northern English lands, but mostly failed miserably. During the ninth and tenth centuries Danish and Norwegian Vikings alternately invaded and even successfully implanted their leadership and culture onto York.¹⁰ In the late eleventh-century Norman era, the new southern kings attempted to subjugate the northern area as a last English frontier and to finally annex Northumberland with the south.¹¹ The history of the domination of Northumberland coincides with the history of a deeply traditional Anglian people who managed to survive with a distinct culture and showed a strength and spirit to all who meant to conquer them.

Northumbrian scholars all wrestle with the geography, which evolved and changed throughout the pre-Roman, Roman, and post-Roman periods. Scholars usually define the various areas within early Northumberland using two different methods: frontier zones (the transition from one kingdom to the next was a graded continuum rather than the sudden change which is implied by a line) or linear frontiers (actual border lines, often punctuated by military structures or the landscape).¹² In the Anglo-Saxons, James Campbell deals with the early Roman military

constructions in Britain.⁷ Campbell sees Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall as impenetrable structures at the borders of Roman occupied Britain.¹³

Campbell's work illustrates the argument for linear frontiers. For Northumberland, Campbell traces the Roman military at Hadrian's Wall and finds that large permanent reductions in force strength along the wall began under Consul Magnus Maximus, commander of the Roman legions based out of York, in 383.¹⁴ The departure of the legions continued into the early fifth century.

By 407, only a remnant of the original Roman military remained stationed on the wall. Campbell remarks on the impressiveness of Hadrian's Wall as a fortified structure, the frequent repairs and maintenance made to it, as well as the large numbers garrisoned at it for nearly three hundred years.¹⁵ Most importantly, Campbell believes the wall existed to protect Roman Britain from the Picts who lived north of the Solway Firth-Firth of Forth line by preventing access from north of the wall into the southern Roman held lands.¹⁶ Britons lived in the region between the Picts and the Wall. The Picts never accepted Roman rule and, as the enemy of Rome, engaged the frontier legions in pitched border battles.

Alfred Smyth proposes that the Roman fortifications of northern Britain served several purposes for the army.¹⁷ He suggests that Celtic society in the British kingdoms did not die with the occupation by Rome, as the garrisoned forts across the landscape prove.¹⁸ From fortifications and watch towers spread around the old tribal kingdom borders and along the newly built roads, the Romans were able to oversee their occupied zone. Smyth believes the Romans used their forts, towers, and Hadrian's Wall to prevent outsiders from entering Roman-held land, to block passageways and therefore communications across the Pennine Foothills (a mountain range that runs centrally north to south), to watch the travel patterns of the natives, and to provide protection to the Roman mining centers.¹⁹

Roman engineers laid a network of roads across northern Britain which connected the scattered forts, making quick communication between garrisoned posts possible. The Pennines and Cheviots (another central mountain range north of the Pennine Foothills) also served as natural obstacles to east-west travel, with only two easily fordable openings at the Tyne Gap

and the Liddesdale-Teviotdale valley.²⁰ Hadrian's Wall runs through the Tyne Gap, Smyth believes purposefully, in order to staunch the unregulated flow of natives north to south.²¹ While addressing a broader range of functions for the Roman garrisons, Smyth agrees with Campbell that they were intended to protect the Romans from outside invasions, at the same time proposing that there was a need for protection from the native tribes south of Hadrian's Wall as well.²²

David Rollason argues that the kingdoms of northern Britain were defined and maintained through military aggression and as such were in a continuous state of flux indefinable by a line.²³ Rollason calls instead for the use of frontier zones, i.e. march areas, to describe the boundaries between the kingdoms in the North.²⁴ He uses archaeological evidence for Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall to explain early frontier zones. Offa's Dyke is an earthen wall built as a north-south partition between an early British kingdom and Mercia.²⁵ The evidence reveals Anglo-Saxon style settlements west of the wall, on the British side, and permeable gaps intermittently along its length. Hadrian's Wall arguably functioned as a fortified doorway between the Pict and British kingdoms to its north and Romanized Britain to its south. The oversized gates located within each mile castle along the wall have been interpreted as portals through which passage was allowed, even regulated, and therefore represent another example of intermingling across man-made linear barriers. Based on these archaeological findings, Rollason's argument for frontier zones frequented by the peoples living on either side of a constructed partition seems valid. As such it is accepted that there is the existence of frontier zones, rather than the simple demarcation of linear frontiers for territorial boundaries.

There were many kingdoms and therefore frontier zones within post-Roman northern Britain, most without grand structures, such as Hadrian's Wall, to mark their fluctuating boundaries.²⁶ The British kingdom of Catraeth included the lands south of the Wear River to Cleveland just at the edge of the North York Moors and westward to the eastern edge of the Pennine foothills. The region along the Ayre River, around modern day Leeds, might have been a small British kingdom called Elmet (Elfed). Sources make rare mention of such a place or of kings over the area.²⁷ Some place-names in the region retain the name

Elmet (Elfed), such as Tanshelf, which gives the impression that the kingdom in fact existed, even if only for a short time.²⁸

Rheged, a British kingdom west of the Pennines, covered the area from the plain north of the Solway Firth south to the Vale of Eden. It is possible that Rheged extended as far south as Lonsdale (including the Lake District) at some point, therefore including southern Cumbria within its territory. The Strathclyde Britons controlled the lands north of the Plain of Solway along the western coast of Britain. Their lands spread eastward from their center at Dumbarton Rock (Ail Cluathe), on the west coast across from modern Edinburgh, toward a shared border with Gododdin.

The British tribe called the Votadini by the Romans, reclaimed independence and governed their kingdom of Gododdin, located along the east coast of Britain. The northern Gododdin border is generally accepted as the Firth of Forth, to the north of which resided the southern Picts. Higham intimates that the region between the Gododdin and Catraeth kingdoms most likely belonged to another British tribe, with a royal center at Din Guoaroi and encompassing the region of Brynaich.²⁹ Smyth and Rollason claim that Gododdin stretched south to the Rivers Wear or Tees, with Edinburgh (Din Eidyn) as either their main stronghold or one of their royal fortresses.³⁰

Dumville relies on Kenneth Jackson, who believes the Gododdin occupied all lands east of the foothills from the Tees River to the Firth of Forth, including the region of Manau on the head of the Forth. If this is true, then the Gododdin kingdom would have also encompassed the royal estate of Din Guoaroi, as well as the area of Brynaich. These kingdoms were conquered by the Angles in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries and transformed into two Anglian Northumbrian kingdoms.

By the late fourth century the Romans began withdrawing from Britain. Sometime prior to or during the consulship of Magnus Maximus, the legions had abandoned the wooden Antonine wall in favor of the larger stone wall of Hadrian. Also around this time, Germanic Anglian warriors invaded the plain of York. The Roman fort at York had served as an important intermediary military post connecting the northern Wall with southern forts and towns, such as Bath. Britons began staging rebellions against the Romans, as the Angles cut off the Roman's supply line from south of York, making it virtually impossible for

the Roman forces to maintain their northernmost posts in Britain.³¹

In the early fifth century, the Roman occupation of northern Britain was ending and they abandoned all forts along the Cheviot Hill range. The power vacuum created by the end of Roman occupation caused the British kingdoms in Northumberland to form coalitions in order to defend against invasions from northern Picts and eastern Irish invaders, as well as the Angles. At this point in the history of this region, varying accounts make it difficult to establish the actual end of Roman domination and the beginning of the Anglian kingdoms in Northumberland. Bede recorded that in 449 a British king named Vortigern paid Germanic warriors from the continent to assist the British in repelling attacks from the Picts and Irish.³²

At that time the race of the Angles or Saxons, invited in advance by a king, came to Britain in three warships and by command of the king were granted a place of settlement in the eastern part of the island, ostensibly to fight on behalf of the country, but their real intention was to conquer it. First they fought against the enemy who attacked from the north and the Saxons won the victory. A report of this as well as of the fertility of the island and the slackness of the Britons reached their homes and at once a much larger fleet was sent over with a stronger band of warriors; this, added to the contingent already there, made an invincible army. The newcomers received from the Britons a grant of land in their midst on condition that they fought against their foes for the peace and safety of the country, and for this the soldiers were also to receive pay.

Germanic warriors fought in war bands for a designated leader, who in turn shared captured and stolen goods with his war band, usually awarding the bravest with arm rings and larger portions of the spoils. Typically, warriors entered the war bands of successful leaders, causing some leaders to gain notoriety and even political strength. As a result, in Britain the war band leaders with the greatest military backing could easily make bids for control over any lands obtained by the war band. It remains uncertain in which the two pieces of land Vortigern supposedly awarded to the Angles, but the trend has been to assume that they were the lands which became the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira.³³ Therefore, the Anglian kings who rose to power in

Northumberland most likely were the leaders of the greatest warriors and the lands received from the British king provided them all new land on which to settle.

Blair claims that this period of transition from Roman dominance to British successor kingdoms was in fact the British heroic age.³⁴ Roman York was the center of military operations in Britain, the strongest fortress, and a Roman-style colony. It also served as the home of the Roman leader in Britain, referred to as a Caesar until Magnus Maximus, commander at York, in the fourth century who instead preferred the title of Consul. After living and working side by side with the Romans, especially in the region of York, British warriors were well trained and equipped to hold their own against Pictish and Irish invasions. The fact that they remained in control of their kingdoms, even as they sought to employ the Angles, attests to British military ability.

Blair therefore accepts the textual evidence of Bede, Gildas and the *Historia Brittonum* about a British king hiring Germanic ‘auxiliary’ warriors to assist the British defenses against Pictish invasions.³⁵ The British provided these German military troops with provisions as well as land for settlement. This strategy was clearly learned from the Romans at York. The Roman legions regularly engaged mercenaries on the continent from the ‘federated nations’, those Germanic tribal kingdoms whose warriors fought alongside the legions as contracted *fœderati* soldiers.³⁶

Smyth finds that throughout the fifth century the skeletal Roman forces still at York worked with the Angles by hiring them as *soldati* (warriors who worked for sold, mercenary pay).³⁷ He also believes this initial Anglian force was later joined in the early sixth century by fellow Angles from across the North Sea. Smyth suggests this combined group struck out on its own to found the Anglian kingdom of Deira, presumably with the military elite assuming the roles of an aristocracy. Under a separate Anglian aristocracy, the British fortress at Din Guoaroi was overtaken, renamed Bebban burh (Bamburgh), and became the royal center of a second Anglian kingdom.³⁸ This account places two leading Anglian war bands fearlessly carving out new homes amongst the British.

Dumville seconds this analysis concerning the Angles in the region of York, but not Smyth’s dates. Accepting the textual

evidence of Gildas and the archaeological finds by Leslie Alcock, Dumville believes that old Roman military centers from York to Catterick were controlled by Anglian war bands sometime in the second half of the fifth century.³⁹ No one knows for sure how or why the Angles came to take over the military sites of southern Northumberland in the fifth century; it might have occurred during employment by the Romans or the Britons, or as colonization and expansion within the British realm. Whatever the reason, the acceptance of archaeological finds combined with the extant texts provides us with a better target range for the date of Anglian settlement in Northumberland.

Higham relies on the archaeological evidence found by Brian Hope-Taylor's inspection of the royal estate at Yeavinger to propose an alternative beginning for the Anglian Northumbrian kingdoms.⁴⁰ According to Hope-Taylor, Yeavinger showed signs of being independent of British rule by 500.⁴¹ This contradicts Smyth's date for the foundation of an Anglian kingdom in the southern region of Gododdin in the course of the sixth century. To further this claim, Anglian artifacts dating to 500 have been found at Corbridge, which was inclusive of the early northernmost Anglian kingdom along with the Tyne River region. Also at this time the Tweed-Tyne region lacked Christian art, which further supports the theory of pagan Anglian inhabitants in the early sixth century. In contrast, the bordering British kingdoms of Gododdin in Lothian and Rheged contained Christian commemoration stones, such as the 'Brigomaglos' stone which was engraved with a Christian dedication to a British leader.⁴² Higham's reliance on archaeological evidence thus points him to a strong non-Christian Anglian settlement inland between Corbridge and Yeavinger that was flourishing by 500, amidst Christian British kingdoms. Higham finds corroboration for the archaeology in the *Historia Brittonum*, which claims that Ida (547-560) merged Din Guoaroi with Brynaich to form the kingdom of Bernicia and that he faced a British opponent named Dutigern (Euderyn) in the region.⁴³

Ida, son of Eobba, held the regions in the north of Britain that is the sea of Humber, and ruled for twelve years, and joined Din Guoaroi with Brynaich, these two regions became one region; that is Deura Bernech, in English Deira and Bernicia. At that time Dutigern then fought bravely against the English nation.

Likewise the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recognizes Ida as the

founder of the Northumbrian kingdom that included Bamburgh as the main royal citadel. Although the Chronicle credits him with the construction of the fortress, it is more likely that he reinforced and added to the pre-existing British structure and compound. In this year Ida from who first awoke the royal race of the Northumbrians seized and ascended the throne and reigned twelve years. He built Bamburgh which was first enclosed by a beam fence and thereafter with an earthen rampart.⁴⁴

Considering all the evidence, Ida apparently expanded the inland Anglian settlement toward the eastern coast by driving the local British from the coastal region, acquiring the British stronghold of Din Guaroï, then extending his kingdom to include the area between the Tyne and Tees Rivers.⁴⁵ This account differs greatly from Smyth, who states that an Anglian kingdom began at Din Guaroï and spread inland toward the Cheviot Hills into the Gododdin region. Based upon the evidence provided by the researchers; going forward, we will adopt Higham's assessment of the sources and argument for the foundation of the Anglian kingdom.

Geography of Northumberland

The Roman road system across Northumberland also proved initially useful to the Angles in conquering Gododdin between the Tweed and Tyne Rivers.⁴⁶ Dere Street, which ran from Corbridge on the Tyne River north to Inveresk on the Firth of Forth, was as vital to the Anglian expansion of Northumbria, as it had been in uniting the Roman military posts there. Control of this roadway separated the two ancient British kingdoms, Rheged to the west of the Pennine foothills and Gododdin on the east coast. The early Angles of Bernicia utilized control of this road to drive a wedge between the two British kingdoms, making it easier to conquer and push the Gododdin British along the east coast north above the Tweed River.⁴⁷

The geography of Northumberland included a series of central foothills that served to further subdivide kingdoms and to direct travel mostly along a north-south track. The Pennine, Cheviot, and Lammermuir foothills are the highlands that run north to south and provided limited habitable and arable zones in central Northumberland.⁴⁸ During the sixth century, the Anglian invasions

pushed many Britons into this inhospitable, non-arable highland zone, from which many British warrior bands fled to Ireland as mercenary fighters for the Ulster Uí Néills.⁴⁹ The Angles settled into the arable lowlands of Northumberland, which consisted of the eastern coast and the many dales that snaked along the highland zone. Later in the tenth and eleventh centuries these highland areas turned into a lawless region, a place dangerous for travelers.

After Ida successfully utilized the natural geography and Roman roads to assist in getting a foothold into Northumberland, his heirs continued the campaigns against local British tribes, who were led by several impressive war band leaders.⁵⁰ The British warrior kings identified in the *Historia Brittonum* as active Anglian opponents include Urien of Catraeth and Rheged; Rhydderch Hen of Strathclyde; Gwallawg (of Elmet); and Morcant (Morgan of Gododdin).⁵¹

Against them the four kings, Urien, and Rhydderch Hen, and Gwallawg and Morcant, did fight. Theodric [king of Bernicia, 572-579] fought bravely against the well-known Urien and his sons.⁵² However, now and then the enemy [Angles] had conquered, at another time the citizens [Britons]. And himself [Urien] confined them [Angles] for three days and three nights in the island of Metcaud [Lindisfarne].⁵³ While he [Urien] was on this expedition, he was butchered. Morcant was blind before jealousy, because about himself, his [Urien's] great army had renewed war with every king.⁵⁴

Higham believes Husa (585-592) to be the Bernician king forced out of the Tyne River region and onto Lindisfarne Island by Urien's ground forces, while Dumville interprets the source to mean Theodric (572-579).⁵⁵ The need for a confederacy of British warriors from every region surrounding the early Anglian kingdom of Bernicia bespeaks the perceived threat of Bernicia. The most likely incursions began as British raids from the south, led by Urien's forces, up into the Tyne valley. These raids forced the Bernicians north and eventually into a defensive position on the island of Lindisfarne. As the above passage relates, inter-tribal tensions among the British leadership caused the death of Urien, clearly the most talented military strategist of the coalition, which swung the pendulum of power back to the Angles. Afterwards, Husa reclaimed dominance of Bernicia and especially its fortified

estate of Bamburgh.⁵⁶

The first recorded Anglian leader in the British kingdom of Catraeth is Ælle (560- 588/590). His immediate successors were Aethelric (588-593), about whom we know nothing, and Æthelfrith (592-616), the grandson of Ida of Bernicia, who ruled Deira and Bernicia from 593.⁵⁷ The early history of this region shows strong Anglian presence throughout the sixth century, and quite possibly as far back as the early fifth century around York, giving credence to the Roman-Anglian *soldati* argument. The original region associated with Anglian Deira includes York to the southeast across the River Derwent encompassing the lands to the Humber River and the North Sea. The first phase of expansion in Deira took the Angles north along the Humber River into the Vale of York, to just south of the Tees River.⁵⁸ There the Battle of Catterick was waged between a second allied coalition, led by King Mynyddog of Gododdin, and the successful Anglian forces of King Æthelfrith (592-616).⁵⁹ This strategy allowed the Angles to control more coastline as well as the arable lowland zones, while the defeated British were pushed up into the non-arable Pennine highlands.

Beginning with the reigns of Ida (547-559) of Bernicia and Ælle (560-588) of Deira, an Anglian military and political leadership was firmly in place at Bamburgh Castle and York, which was continued by their successors.⁶⁰ Northumbrian kings ruled with the aid of loyal officials and military leaders of varying ranks or stations, who also served in an advisory capacity as needed. Beginning with the rule of Oswiu in Deira (655-670) members of the royal families occasionally ruled Deira as *subreguli* or *principes* (sub-kings).⁶¹ Likewise those holding the rank of *patricii* (patrician; the rank of *ealdorman* in Old English, leader, nobleman) were perceived as important as a sub-king and served as the right-hand man, or premier official, of the king. A comparison to the Merovingian *maior domus* may be acceptable. Next were the *duces* (dukes; also *ealdorman* in Old English), whose political roles are unclear but they must have been landholding magnates and warriors. Those with the title *prefecti* (prefects) had charge of fortified and garrisoned complexes in *urbes* (towns) which held political prisoners.⁶² Even in status with the *prefecti* were the *comites* (counts; *gesiðas* in Old English, military retainer), but their position may have been social only,

while the *prefecti* clearly held a royal office. *Gesiðas* generally were wealthy married landholders with an established family lineage. Last in political hierarchical importance were the royal *ministri*, *milites* (ministers, soldiers; *ðegnas* in Old English, thanes), who served as attendants and warriors for the king. Their roles as attendants extended to accompanying their king or the heir of a deceased king into exile. Without ownership of land they lived in the royal estates giving them the reputation of household retainers. The distinguished career of a royal *ðegn* could be rewarded with a land gift or *læn* (legal right), promoting the *ðegn* to the rank of *gesið*.⁶³ Thus the kings of Northumbria worked with a powerful and sophisticated governmental bureaucracy (*witan*, royal council), which enhanced the strength of the rulers. Unless militarily detained, the *witan* gathered on annual religious holidays with the kings in order to handle political matters.⁶⁴

A powerful and aggressive king, *Æthelfrith* (592-616), a grandson of *Ida*, succeeded *Hussa* as King of *Bernicia*. In the following year *Æthelfrith* used his marriage to *Ælle*'s daughter *Acha* and seized the *Deiran* kingdom upon the death of *Æthelric* in 593.⁶⁵ In the process, *Æthelfrith* drove his wife's brother *Edwin*, from *Northumberland*, preventing him from mounting an armed claim to the kingship of *Deira*.⁶⁶ Thenceforward, *Æthelfrith* served as the first king of both *Bernicia* and *Deira*, and as such posed an increased threat to the surrounding kingdoms.

Æthelfrith's ability to defeat a great combined army of *Picts* and *Britons* brought him to the attention of the *Dál Riada Scots*.⁶⁶ Around 500, while the *Angles* were establishing themselves on the eastern coast of Britain, the *Irish kings of Dál Riada* migrated from their citadel of *Dunseverick* on the coast of *County Antrim*.⁶⁷ They settled a group of islands in the North Sea, where *Iona* was founded, and the western region of Britain known as *Argyll*, to the west of *Strathclyde*.⁶⁸ This region of early *Irish settlement* in Britain came to be called *Dál Riada* as well, and eventually spread north of *Strathclyde*, as the *Scots* began slowly taking in *Pictish territory*. *British Strathclyde* and *Gododdin* lay between the two newcomers, *Angles* and *Scots*. After defeating *Mynyddog*, *Æthelfrith* pressed northward from *Bernicia* and annexed *Gododdin*.⁶⁹ This move must have alarmed the *Scots*, as they engaged the *Angles* in battle at *Degsastan* (possibly *Dawstone* in *Liddesdale*) in 603.⁷⁰

For this reason Áedán, King of the Irish living in Britain, aroused by his successes, marched against him [Æthelfrith] with an immensely strong army; but he was defeated and fled with few survivors. Indeed, almost all of his army was cut to pieces in a very famous place called Degsastan, where there is the stone of Degsa commemorating the battle. In this fight Theobald, Æthelfrith's brother, was killed together with all his army.⁴⁶

Following his loss at Degsastan, Áedán mac Gabráin made inroads eastward into British lands, but north of those held by Æthelfrith, mainly around the Firth of Forth.⁴⁸ Two years later Æthelfrith led the Bernicians to victory against the British at Chester (Legacæster), but most likely did not consider land that far south a permanent part of Anglian territory. Higham suggests, however, that Æthelfrith claimed dominance over Rheged, Strathclyde and Gododdin, and most likely the Dál Riada Scots as well. His continuous military success, even at great distances from the strong fortresses of Bernicia and Deira, added to Æthelfrith's formidable reputation in his day. Symeon of Durham recalled Æthelfrith as *potentissimi Regis* (most powerful king), which is extremely high praise from a Christian monk about a non-Christian king. His legacy of military excellence and territorial expansion set the tone for succeeding kings. Æthelfrith's reign laid the foundation for Anglian dominance of Northumberland, which lasted until the Viking invasion of York in 866.

While exiled from Deira by Æthelfrith, Edwin, his brother-in-law, went from Gwynedd to Mercia and finally to East Anglia, where he fell under the protection of the *bretwalda* (Britain-ruler) Rædwald of Mercia. In 616, Æthelfrith attempted to bribe Rædwald into handing over Edwin. When Rædwald refused to cooperate and instead backed Edwin's claim to the throne of Deira, Æthelfrith brought his army south toward Mercia. The two neighboring forces of Northumbria and Mercia met on the battlefield, at a point on the Idle River in the Humber valley. Following Æthelfrith's death in battle, the East Anglian forces of Rædwald ensured that Edwin claimed his inheritance as King of Deira. Edwin expanded his authority over Bernicia, as well as the territories which Æthelfrith had conquered or subdued through alliances, in a power grab which scattered Æthelfrith's heirs. Bede describes King Edwin's connection to his homeland of Deira: "... from which province that man of noble birth had possessed the

lineage and the beginnings of majesty.”⁴⁹

At the death of Rædwald, the East Angles placed themselves under his rule and Edwin peacefully assumed control over all territories tributary to Mercia. Bede recognized Edwin as *bretwalda* after Rædwald. William of Malmesbury tells us that Edwin also brought the Orkney Islands, some Scottish and Pict lands, as well as the British Mevanian Isles (Anglesey and Man) under his control. The addition of the Isles of Anglesey and Man brought direct control of the traffic in the Irish Sea to Northumbria, which Edwin manned with a newly enlarged naval fleet. William of Malmesbury further claims that no public or domestic thefts, rapes, or stealing of another’s inheritance occurred during Edwin’s rule, stating that peace and justice prevailed in all his lands. His management skills of his vast territories therefore matched his excellent military accomplishments.

The Christian Princess Aethelberga of Kent married Edwin in 625 and traveled north with her Christian bishop and private chaplain Paulinus.⁵⁰ In 627, Edwin was converted to Christianity by Bishop Paulinus. This famous conversion, as recorded by Bede, included that of the Anglo-Saxon high priest Coifi, who subsequently assisted in the obliteration of the traditional Anglian religious sites:

[H]e ordered his companions to destroy and set fire to the shrine and all its enclosures. The place where the idols once stood is still shown, not far from York, to the east, over the river Derwent.⁵¹

In place of the pre-Christian Anglian religious ruins King Edwin, like the Roman Emperor Constantine, commissioned a church and baptistery to be built at York for the express purpose of his own baptism. His witan and chief priest Coifi along with all the warriors of the two Anglian kingdoms also joined the king in this initiation ceremony into the Christian Church. Bede informs us that these buildings were hurriedly constructed during the king’s catechism period and that immediately after the ceremony he began construction on a more permanent structure:

[H]e set about building a greater and more magnificent church of stone, under the instructions of Paulinus, in the

midst of which the chapel which he had first built was to be enclosed.⁵²

Edwin died before the new building project was complete, but his successor Oswald saw the project to completion. The Christian conversion of King Edwin transformed Northumbria from a pagan to a Christian territory and set the stage for the introduction of Celtic monks and Celtic religious rites into the kingdom.

Bede records the death of Edwin on the twelfth day of October in 633 at the battle of Hatfield Chase (*Hæthfelth*). On this tragic day, the Northumbrian Angles faced the combined forces of Cædwalla of Gwynedd and Penda of Mercia, who were most likely responding to the expansion campaign of Edwin into British Angelsey and Man. Edwin lost one son, Osfrith, on the battlefield prior to his own death, and another son as a prisoner of war to Penda, who was later murdered by the king.⁵³ In the immediate period following this battle, the victors visited their wrath onto Northumbria.

CHAPTER THREE

The Royal House of Northumbria

Located in Angus, Scotland, the village of Dunnichen lies at the bottom of the gently sloping Dunnichen Hill. The small town of Letham lays to the south and to the north the town of Brechin. The road running through Dunnichen is small and winding. The parish church of Dunnichen sits at the northeast corner of the base of Dunnichen Hill, where King Ecgrith led his Northumbrian troops through the mountain pass to their deaths. The small church with its tall grave-stones overlook what is generally thought to be the site of the Battle of Dunnichen. Today the battle site is well-cleared farmland, with the farmer's house standing at the base of the hill in the center of the lush land. The day after I had heard the ghost story at the Plough Inn I visited the site. It was a clear autumn day and the sun was shining through thin clouds. The temperature was crisp, but not cold. It was a Sunday afternoon and there was not another person in sight, so I had a clear view of the battle site. The landscape has changed considerably since that fateful day in May when the Picts freed their homeland. The forest covering Dunnichen Hill that was once so useful to the Picts in their assault on the unsuspecting Northumbrians is now gone. Instead, only a few trees stand in an almost single file across the top of Dunnichen Hill, because the majority of the hill has been cleared for the pasturing of cattle and sheep. The swampy marsh that once occupied the base of Dunnichen Hill is now covered with bright green cover crops alternating with rich, dark plowed land. All that remains of the deadly mire that once helped the Picts defeat the Northumbrians is a small pond that provides the habitat for the local waterfowl.

The events that led up to the Battle of Dunnichen began in the early seventh century with the rise to power of the Northumbrian kingdom:

Seventh and eighth century Anglo-Saxon kings, like their Merovingian counterparts, inherited the tradition of violence, rivalry, mimetic desire, sacrifice, and scapegoating of their Germanic forebears. Their conversion to Christianity did not immediately free them to choose a higher and better mimesis, based on Christ as model/mediator. Neither were many of the clergy and bishops liberated from the same power struggles, even though they usually forwent slaughter and murder to achieve their goals.¹

Through the constant interchange of allies and enemies, the Northumbrian kings were able to amass good fortunes for themselves in the seventh century. The kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia were continually being divided and passed between royal families as each one successfully overcame the other. This created great tension among the Northumbrians and their neighbors the Picts and Britons, because Deira and Bernicia were constantly making and breaking alliances with these surrounding kingdoms.² It is this dynamic and unstable environment that exists throughout the Kingdom of Northumbria when King Ecgrith assumes the throne. It is also with Ecgrith's assumption of the throne that Northumbrian conquest for total domination over his northern neighbors, the Picts, would be abandoned and the English northern border would be established once and for all.² The end of Northumbrian ascendancy occurred with the Battle of Dunnichen and the death of Ecgrith in 685 A.D.³

The power struggle for the Northumbrian royal house in the seventh century began with Æthelfrith, the King of Bernicia, grandson of Ida.⁴ According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Æthelfrith succeeded to the throne of Northumbria in the year 593.⁵ Æthelfrith is the first king to rule both Deira and Bernicia simultaneously.⁶ Bede gives evidence for this when he says that Æthelfrith was "a very brave king and most eager for glory" who ruled over "the kingdom of Northumbria."⁷ Nennius, in his history of Britain refers to the Northumbrian king as "Æthelferth the Artful."⁸

Bede uses the momentous Battle of Degsastan to date King Æthelfrith's reign.⁹ In the reference, Bede says that King Aedan, ruler of the Scots of Dalriada, waged war against King Æthelfrith and the English.¹⁰ Bede suggests that the reason Aedan brought war upon Æthelfrith was due to the immense power the

Northumbrian king was gathering. The defeated King Aedan and a few remaining Scots fled the battlefield when “Æthelfrith brought this war to an end in the year of our Lord 603, and the eleventh year of his reign, which lasted for twenty-four years.”¹¹ The outcome of the war was so devastating to the Scots that “From that time no Irish king in Britain has dared to make war on the English race to this day.”¹²

Through the description given by Bede, it appears that Æthelfrith was a true warrior king in that he gave no quarter to the other kingdoms surrounding Northumbria. Æthelfrith also waged war on the people of Caerlegion, which in modern times is known as Chester.¹³ Bede compares Æthelfrith to King Saul of Israel due to his continual devastation of the Britons and his large holdings of settled land. He also claims that Æthelfrith “exterminated or conquered the natives.”¹⁴ Æthelfrith’s relentless pursuit of Edwin of Deira is a prime example of how far he was willing to go to eliminate a possible obstacle in his quest for power. This pursuit, however, appears to have been more costly for Æthelfrith than he could have ever imagined, since it would eventually cost him his life. Regardless, Æthelfrith persisted and Edwin was apparently harassed and eventually forced into exile after he assumed the throne.¹⁵ The conflict that existed between these two men came from the fact that Edwin was the rightful successor of Deira and, therefore, as long as he was alive he posed a threat to Æthelfrith’s total supremacy over all of Northumbria.

Edwin fled and lived as a “fugitive” for several years throughout the surrounding kingdoms before he found refuge at the court of King Raedwald of the Angles.¹⁶ When Æthelfrith found out where Edwin was hiding, he offered Raedwald “large sums of money” if he would kill him and when this offer failed to persuade Raedwald, Æthelfrith sent another supposition “offering even larger gifts of silver and further threatening to make war on him if Raedwald despised his offer.”¹⁷ With this threat of war, Raedwald capitulated and agreed to either kill Edwin or hand him over.¹⁸ Upon hearing this news, a friend of Edwin rushed to him and informed him of Raedwald’s intentions. When Edwin’s friend offered to take him away from the threats of both kingdoms, Edwin refused. Edwin claimed that Raedwald had shown no ill will toward him thus far and if he must be killed he would rather be killed by Raedwald, who had shown him kindness, than be

killed by the savage, Æthelfrith.

Later that night, while Edwin was contemplating his fate, he received a vision from a man that forecasted his glory throughout the English kingdoms and his defeat of his enemies. In return for the good news the prophecy revealed, Edwin promised that he would be truly grateful to the person that made possible his life and his glory and he further promised to uphold the teachings of his savior.

Immediately following the vision, his dear friend returned to him with the news that King Raedwald has changed his mind and was going to spare his life. Apparently Raedwald's queen had persuaded him that no amount of money was worth the life of a friend. Raedwald then agreed to help Edwin overthrow Æthelfrith and assume the throne as king. However, before Æthelfrith even had time to engage his full army, Raedwald attacked and killed Æthelfrith on the border of Mercia. After the defeat of the Bernician king, Edwin assumed the throne of his bitter enemy, Æthelfrith.¹⁹

Edwin was the son of Ælle, who was once the king of Deira.²⁰ Mention of Edwin's reign is made in *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, which was written by a monk at Whitby anonymously sometime between the years 680-704.²¹ The Whitby writer calls the English race at this time the *Humbrensum*.²² The anonymous monk gives Edwin as much praise as Bede gives him throughout his history. The Whitby monk writes that some of his people, the English, went to Rome where Pope Benedict insisted on meeting these light haired people with fair eyes. Upon meeting the travelers the Pope asked them where they were from and what was the name of their people and in return they answered:

The people we belong to are called Angles." "Angels of God," he replied. Then he asked further, "What is the name of the king of that people?" They said, "Aelli," whereupon he said, "Alleluia, God's praise must be heard there." Then he asked the name of their own tribe, to which they answered, "Deire," and he replied, "They shall flee from the wrath of God to the faith."²³

These holy men, therefore, misunderstood the word "Angles" for "angels" and, henceforth, they were seen to be of a mysterious and divinely sent nature.

Following this ecclesiastical meeting, Gregory, who was not yet Pope, asked Pope Benedict if he could travel to this land of the angels. In his attempt at persuasion, Gregory claimed: "It would be a wretched thing for hell to be filled with such lovely vessels."²⁴ The Pope accepted the plea made by Gregory and he was given permission to go and save their souls from eternal damnation. The Whitby writer totally ignores Ælle and Edwin's previous pagan ways, but instead concentrates on Edwin's virtuous and Christian conversion.

Frank Stenton remarks "Edwin's overlordship marks an important stage in the movement of the English peoples toward unity, for it first brought the southern kingdoms into definite association with Northumbria."²⁵ Edwin was also instrumental in putting the English in touch with kingdoms outside of Britain. For instance, by marrying Aethelberht of Kent and Bertha of Paris's daughter, Aethelburh.²⁶ Edwin was able to gain recognition from the Merovingian dynasty, not to mention, he now had an important connection with the kingdom of Kent. Edwin ruled both Deira and Bernicia and eventually came to rule over Raedwald's kingdom, which meant that he now also ruled the English south of the Humber. ²⁷ In regard to Edwin's ever expanding realm, Bede adds, "So, like no other English king before him, he held under his sway the whole realm of Britain, not only English kingdoms but those ruled over by the Britons as well. He even brought the islands of Anglesey and Man under his power."²⁸ Bede furthers his affections for King Edwin by proclaiming: "It is related that there was so great a peace in Britain, wherever the dominion of King Edwin reached, that, as the proverb still runs, a woman with a newborn child could walk throughout the island from sea to sea and take no harm."²⁹

Bede concludes that Edwin reigned for seventeen years as king until the twelfth day of October 633, when he was slain at age forty-eight in the battle at Haethfelth, or Hatfield Chase. King Caedwalla of the Britons and Penda, from the Mercian royal house, attacked and defeated Edwin and his army.³⁰ Bede claims that Caedwalla "rebelled against him," inferring that Edwin had previously attacked or taken control of Caedwalla's territory.³¹ This attack by Caedwalla, King of Gwynedd, was perhaps a retaliation action taken against Edwin who had previously overtaken him at a place called Priestholm.³²

At the Battle of Hatfield Chase, Edwin's son Osfrith was also killed. Edwin's oldest son, Eadfrith, gave himself up to Penda, at whose court he was killed without regard to the promise of safety he had made to Eadfrith.³³ Following the untimely death of Edwin, Bede continues, "At this time there was a great slaughter both of the Church and of the people of Northumbria," which was brought about by Caedwalla and Penda.³⁴ With the death of Edwin came the end to his confederation, the end of his branch in the royal house and the destruction of the joint kingdom of Deira and Bernicia. There remained one survivor to the house of Edwin, his daughter Eanflaed, who eventually married Oswald's brother, Oswiu.³⁵

After the death of Edwin, the Kingdom of Deira fell to his Uncle Aelfric's son Osric.³⁶ The Kingdom of Bernicia went to Æthelfrith's oldest son Eanfrith, the rightful successor to the kingdom. Bede claims that prior to Edwin's death, Æthelfrith's sons and many of the other young men from noble families fled in exile to live among either the Scots or the Picts.³⁷ After the defeat and death of Edwin, the exiles were allowed to return to their homelands and to assume their rightful positions as rulers of Bernicia and Deira. With the expulsion of Eanfrith and his brothers to surrounding kingdoms during the years 616-617, came the forging of relationships amongst the Northumbrians and their border neighbors. While in exile among the Picts, Eanfrith married a Pictish princess. This alliance was surely accepted amongst both royal houses or it would have never been allowed to take place, especially since Eanfrith was there as an exile. Molly Miller suggests that this Bernician and Pictish marriage was "from the Pictish point of view, highly prestigious, and must be taken as (among other things) an indication of unfriendliness to Edwin."³⁸ Talorcan was the name of the son that Eanfrith had with the Pictish princess. The Pictish Chronicle records Tallorcen, another spelling for Talorcan, as King of the Picts and as the "son of Eanfrith."³⁹

Shortly after the Osric and Eanfrith assumed control over their kingdoms, Caedwalla, king of the Britons, killed both of them. King Osric of Deira was Caedwalla's first victim. Osric and his army were surprise and defeated by Caedwalla and his forces. Bede says, "After this he occupied the Northumbrian kingdom for a whole year, not ruling them like a victorious king but ravaging

them like a savage tyrant, tearing them to pieces with fearful bloodshed.”⁴⁰ Caedwalla killed Eanfrith and twelve of his companions when they came to discuss peace. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the beginning of Eanfrith’s reign in the year 634. However, the *Chronicle* does not speak of Eanfrith’s death, but it instead claims, “also in this year Oswald succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbrians,” which could only imply the death of Eanfrith.⁴¹

After the death of Eanfrith, Oswald, his brother, raised a small garrison of men to march upon the king of the Britons. Bede says that the clash between Caedwalla and Oswald took place at “Riuus Denisi”, which is called Denisesburn by the English.⁴² Upon the death of Caedwalla, Oswald was accepted as king of both Deira and Bernicia and the kingdoms were joined once again, possibly because no one from the Deiran royal house sought revenge for the murder of Osric.⁴³ Bede claims that Oswald was Edwin’s nephew via Acha, Edwin’s sister.⁴⁴ This relationship to Edwin would have given Oswald the connection he needed to rule the Kingdom of Deira legitimately.

According to Bede, Oswald was a very kind and generous king who “In fact he held under his sway all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain, divided among the speakers of four different languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English.”⁴⁵ Bede claims that Oswald was so pious that on Easter day one year he gave the food from his feasting table to a crowd of poor people outside his door. In return for his kind act, Bishop Aidan, who was dining with the king, took Oswald’s right hand and said, “May this hand never decay”⁴⁶ Whether or not these pious acts of King Oswald are fact or fiction is irrelevant, but he was responsible for reconciling the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia, therefore bringing them together again as one kingdom.⁴⁷

The same men who were responsible for the death of Edwin killed Oswald also, writes Bede. Oswald was slain when he was thirty-eight by Penda at a place the English call Maserfelth, which is also known as Oswestry, or the tree or cross of Oswald. Bede records the date of Oswald’s death to be the fifth of August.⁴⁸ With the death of King Oswald once again came the division between the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia. Frank Stenton claims that another great change also occurred upon the death of Oswald, which “left Penda the most formidable king in England.”⁴⁹

Upon the death of Oswald, his brother Oswiu, who at the time was approximately thirty-years-old, took the throne in Bernicia in 643.⁵⁰ Shortly after becoming king, Oswiu began his troubled reign warding off attacks from Penda and the neighboring Mercians and he even experienced great trouble within his own family with his son and nephew, Alhfrith and Oethelwald.⁵¹ According to *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* by Eddius Stephanus, Alhfrith actually ruled in tandem with his father Oswiu for a couple of years around 658: “Alhfrith, who was reigning with his father Oswiu...”⁵² If the account of Eddius is accurate, Alhfrith actually had quite a lot of pull within the kingdom, which would insinuate that he perhaps ruled equally with his father instead of under him, especially since he refers to him as king. In the year 660, Alhfrith gave Bishop Wilfrid the monastery at Ripon, which makes him joint ruler of the kingdom for at least two years.⁵³ Eddius continues calling Alhfrith king as late as 663-664, when Alhfrith and his father received a visit from bishop Agilberht.⁵⁴

Bede begins the story of Oswiu's reign with a passage describing the new king of Bernicia: “At the beginning of his reign Oswiu had as a partner in the royal dignity a man called Oswine, of the family of King Edwin, a son of Osric who has already been mentioned. He was a man of great piety and religion and ruled the kingdom of Deira for seven years in the greatest prosperity, beloved by all.”⁵⁵ Bede gives no explanation for the reason Deira wanted Edwin's kin to have the throne rather than Oswald's successor, but he instead avoids the issue by praising Oswine and his pious nature.⁵⁶ Perhaps it may be inferred that Oswald had subjected the Kingdom of Deira in a manner that they would not soon forget. Bede does claim that Oswiu was hostile towards Oswine and, in fact, he even had the King of Deira killed.⁵⁷ Oswiu's nephew Oethelwald took the throne after the death of Oswine. Barbara Yorke suggests that perhaps Oethelwald replaced Oswine as a sub-king to Oswiu, which would lend reason as to why Oswiu did not take control of the kingdom himself.⁵⁸ As for why Oswiu waited until the ninth year of Oswine's reign to murder him is unclear, but lack of reason is a common occurrence in Bede's history.

Regarding Oswiu's treacherous relationship with the Mercians and Penda Bede pronounces:

About this time King Oswiu was exposed to the savage and insupportable attacks of Penda, so often mentioned before, the king of the Mercians who had killed Oswiu's brother. Oswiu was at last forced to promise him an incalculable and incredible store of royal treasures and gifts as the price of peace, on condition that Penda would return home and cease to devastate, or rather utterly destroy, the kingdoms under his rule. But the heathen king would not accept his offer, for he was determined to destroy and exterminate the whole people from the greatest to the least; so Oswiu turned to God's mercy for help seeing that nothing else could save them from this barbarous and evil enemy.⁵⁹

Bede claims that Oswiu's army was small and that the army of Penda was thirty times larger than the Bernician king's.⁶⁰ Oethelwald, Oswiu's own blood was at the head of the enemy army, leading them against his uncle, at least until the time of the battle when he ran and hid in a safe place.⁶¹ The battle took place near Winwaed, which at the time Bede says was overflowing due to heavy rains. King Oswiu and his son Alhfrith were successful against the heathen army and Penda and the Mercians were put down at the battle.⁶² Because the river was swollen from the rain, many more of the enemy was drowned as they were attempting to flee the battle.⁶³

Even though Oswiu had been successful in the fight against Penda at Winwaed, King Oswiu brought the campaign to a close in the district of *Loidis* (Leeds) on 15 November in the thirteenth year of his reign, to the great benefit of both peoples; for he "freed his own subjects from the hostile devastations of the heathen people and converted the Mercians and the neighbouring kingdoms to a state of grace in the Christian faith, having destroyed their heathen ruler."⁶⁴

After the final defeat of Penda, Bede claims that "King Oswiu ruled over the Mercian race, as well as the rest of the southern kingdoms, for three years after King Penda was killed. Oswiu also subjected the greater part of the Pictish race to the dominion of the English."⁶⁵ The fact that the Picts are being "*subiecit*" suggests that the Northumbrian king was ruling them externally from within his own kingdom. Further proof of the extent of King Oswiu's domination over the Picts may be inferred from Bede's statement that "Wilfrid was administering the see of the church at

York and of all the Northumbrians and Picts, as far as Oswiu's power extended.”⁶⁶ Therefore, as of the year 655, the Northumbrian kingdom, ruled over by the Bernician line, dominated most of Britain and southern Scotland. However, Northumbria would not see its true climax until the reign of King Ecgrith.

After Oswiu ruled the Mercians and had them under his control, he turned the southern part of Mercia over to Penda's son, Peada. Unfortunately for Peada, Bede remarks, he was murdered by the doing of his wife who happened to be the daughter of Oswiu.⁶⁷ After the untimely death of Peada, three Mercian ealdormen rebelled against the rule of King Oswiu and placed Wulfhere, another of Penda's sons, on the throne. Bede says that King Wulfhere ruled the Kingdom of Mercia for seventeen years.⁶⁸ However, Mercia and Deira were not king Oswiu's only areas of concern. Bede remarks that Oswiu “overwhelmed and made tributary” on the Picts and Scots who lived in the northern regions of Britain.⁶⁹

As for King Oswiu, he spent the rest of his reign, according to Bede, pursuing a solution to the question of the true dating of Easter, an argument that had been ongoing between the Irish and the Roman church for years. In 670, King Oswiu became ill and died at age fifty-eight on the fifteenth of February.⁷⁰ Bede claims that Oswiu was so dedicated to the ways of the Roman church that he intended to travel to Rome and live until his death if he ever recovered.⁷¹ The Kingdom of Northumbria fell to Oswiu's son Ecgrith. King Ecgrith would continue his father's legacy of power and domination until the year 685, when the Northumbrians were forced to pay “for having such brave Christian kings, they were a terror to all the barbarian nations.”⁷²

It appears that throughout the seventh century, the Bernician royal line was often ruthless in its desperate attempts to rule England exclusively. Æthelfrith, his sons, and his grandsons all clearly demonstrate their inability to coexist peacefully with other kingdoms. It is their war-like tendencies that would eventually make them the supreme rulers of England for a while, as well as pave the way for their demise.

CHAPTER FOUR

King Ecgrith and the Fall of the Kingdom

William Ferguson perhaps best sums up the early history of northern Britain in his work on the relationship between England and Scotland:

Little is known of North Britain in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and not until the second half of the sixth century does a clearer picture begin to come into focus. Two British kingdoms then existed in south-west Scotland-Strathclyde, with its capital at Dumbarton and Rheged covering Galloway and Cumberland, both speaking Cumbric, a P-Celtic congener of Old Welsh. These two kingdoms were often at feud, however, and largely because of this in the early seventh century they were being hard-pressed by the Angles of Northumbria, Germanic invaders closely related to the Saxons but speaking a different dialect of Anglo- Saxon. Barred from expanding southwards by the Mercians, the Angles were forced to look to the north and the west, and at its greatest extent the Anglian Kingdom of Bernicia covered south-eastern Scotland as far as the Firth of Forth. Attempts by the Angles to expand beyond the Forth ended in defeat by the Picts at Nechtansmere in 685, and in the next two centuries Anglian power slowly declined as, torn by internal dissensions, Northumbria was latterly shaken by Scandinavian assaults.¹

Under the charismatic leadership of King Ecgrith, the Northumbrian royal house and its rise to power seemed unstoppable. King Ecgrith was the fortunate one who was most able to enjoy the fruits of his successor's labor. When he took the throne, he and the Kingdom of Northumbria were in the convenient position of catapulting the English people into a position of domination over all of Britain, including Scotland. However, this comfortable situation at the time of Ecgrith's ascension to the throne would be short-lived. Through his clever

and ruthless battle tactics he would overpower and subjugate the Northumbrian neighbors the Picts, the Britons and the Scots. Ecgfrith was a wise and deliberate warrior king, born from three generations of fierce Anglo-Saxon kings. Just as his predecessors, however, Ecgfrith did not exercise discretion or restraint when it came to the enemy, either realized or potential. Just as his grandfather Æthelfrith had done in his relentless pursuit of Edwin, Ecgfrith would pursue his Pictish neighbors until he became blinded by his desire to exterminate them. Likewise, just as his grandfather before him had done, Ecgfrith would pay with his life for his constant pursuit for total domination.

Although the exact date is unsure, Ecgfrith married his first wife, Æthelthryth, sometime around the year 660. Æthelthryth was the daughter of King Anna, ruler over the kingdom of the East Angles. According to Bede, the marriage to Ecgfrith was her second, for Tondberht, an ealdorman of the kingdom of South Gyrwe, had previously made her a widow. Æthelthryth and Tondberht were not married long when he died, and shortly after his death, she was given in marriage to Ecgfrith.² The marriage between Ecgfrith and Æthelthryth was an interesting arrangement because according to Bede:

Though she lived with him for twelve years she still preserved the glory of perfect virginity. When I asked Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory whether this was true, because certain people doubted it, he told me that he had the most perfect proof of her virginity; in fact Ecgfrith had promised to give him estates and money if he could persuade the queen to consummate their marriage, because he knew that there was none whom she loved more than Wilfrid himself. Nor need we doubt that this which often happened in days gone by, as we learn from trustworthy accounts, could happen in our time too through the help of the Lord, who has promised to be with us even to the end of the age. And the divine miracle whereby her flesh would not corrupt after she was buried was token and proof that she had remained uncorrupted by contact with any man.³

This passage is an indication that the marriage between Ecgfrith and Æthelthryth must have been strictly a political arrangement instead of a marriage of the heart, which according to Bede, was not unusual during this time. Eddius, in Chapter 19,

also gives reference to the piety of Æthelthryth and the nature in which her body was discovered some years after her death.⁴

According to Bede, Æthelthryth pleaded with Ecgrith for some time to allow her to join a convent, where she could serve Christ. Bishop Wilfrid, a trusted friend of the royal family and trusted counselor of the queen, constantly urged Æthelthryth to remain chaste and untouched by man. Ecgrith was only a teenager when he married Æthelthryth, so it was not until several years afterwards that he began pressing for consummation of the marriage. The perpetual chastity of his wife created much anxiety for the viral young king and would also prove to be the source of his dislike for Wilfrid. After several years of imploring her, Ecgrith acceded to the queen's wishes and allowed her to join a monastery in Coldingham, where Ecgrith's aunt Aebbe was the Abbess. Bishop Wilfrid happily conferred upon Æthelthryth the veil and the habit of a nun around the year 672.⁵ After a year in service to Christ at Coldingham, Æthelthryth was given the appointment of Abbess to Ely, where she erected a monastery.⁶ Æthelthryth died seven years after she received her title of abbess, probably from a tumor on her neck. Bede gives the account of her death according to the doctor who administered to the queen. After her death, her sister Seaxburh, who had once been married to Eorcenberht, King of Kent, succeeded her as abbess at Ely.⁷

Wilfrid was one of the most important and powerful men in seventh century Britain. He was a key figure in helping the Christian church, in the Roman tradition, take shape in the seventh century. Wilfrid was the ruler of the Northumbrian church between the years 669-677. While he ruled over the entire spiritual life of Northumbria "He became in these years an outstanding figure in the secular as well as the ecclesiastical life of the North."⁸ Several of the leaders of nearby monasteries sought his protection and guidance and even made him heir to their religious communities upon their deaths. Through this acquisition of many estates, Wilfrid became increasingly more powerful as well as rich. He also became very popular with the royal families, since his monasteries often served as schools where the young nobles would attend, receiving a proper military education.⁹ Therefore, most of the male royal youth of the Northumbrian Kingdom would have been taught and influenced by Wilfrid and his doctrines. At the beginning of King Ecgrith's reign, Wilfrid

was obviously in good favor with the king since he was given several estates where he could build ecclesiastical houses. Eddius, in Chapter 17, tells of one such building project at Ripon, where Wilfrid built a most impressive church and at the consecration he speaks of his great wealth:

Then St. Wilfrid the bishop stood in front of the altar, and, turning to the people, in the presence of the kings, read out clearly a list of the lands which the kings, for the good of their souls, had previously, and on that very day as well, presented to him, with the agreement and over the signatures of the bishops and all the chief men, and also a list of the consecrated places in various parts which the British clergy had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation. It was truly a gift well pleasing to God that the pious kings had assigned so many lands to our bishop for the service of God; these are the names of the regions: round Ribble and Yeadon and the region of Dent and Catlow and other places. Then, when the sermon was over, the kings started upon a great feast lasting for three days and three nights, rejoicing amid all their people, showing magnanimity towards their enemies and humility towards the servants of God.¹⁰

This passage not only tells of the vast wealth Wilfrid possessed but, it also gives evidence of Ecgrith's plunder of the Northumbrian neighbors, the Britons. A.P. Smyth claims that Yeadon must have lain within the kingdom of Elmet, which fell to the English sometime during Edwin's reign. Ribble, Dent, and Catlow, the three other regions given to Wilfrid, were a part of the British Kingdom of Rheged, of which Smyth says; "There is nothing to suggest that these British lands had lain deserted for generations: on the contrary, there is a certain immediacy in Eddius's text which shows us, incidentally, that Anglo-Saxon aggression was directed against British warriors and clergy alike."¹¹ The Kingdom of Rheged, therefore, probably remained independent until sometime in the mid-seventh century, during Ecgrith's reign. These notions that Rheged fell under the authority of Ecgrith, Smyth claims are backed by the fact that Oswiu, Ecgrith's father, married Riemmelth of Rheged. This marriage between the two kingdoms, therefore, "would presuppose that Rheged under Royth, grandson of Urien must

have retained some semblance of British autonomy up to the middle of the seventh century.”¹²

Eddius mentions Ecgrith’s second wife, Iurminburgh, who was “Wilfrid’s bitter enemy, and excited her husband to jealousy of his wealth, the number of his monasteries, and the magnificence of his military following.”¹³ According to Eddius, Ecgrith’s new queen had immense power over the king and persuaded him that something should be done about Wilfrid’s colossal empire which he had accrued over the years:

Forthwith this sorceress shot poisoned arrows of speech from her quiver into the heart of the king, as the wicked Jezebel did when she slew the prophets of the Lord and persecuted Elijah. She eloquently described to him all the temporal glories of St. Wilfrid, his riches, the number of his monasteries, the greatness of his buildings, his countless army of followers arrayed in royal vestments and arms. With such shafts as these the king’s heart was wounded. They both sought skillfully to humiliate the holy head of the Church to their own destruction and boldly to defraud him of the gifts which the kings had given him for God’s sake.¹⁴

After Ecgrith had been made aware of Wilfrid’s riches and possessions, he called for Archbishop Theodore to come and review the situation. Ecgrith decided that Wilfrid’s power and property had grown to in excess, so in turn he divided the single diocese into three, with the help of Theodore, in the year 678. Theodore, abiding by the king’s wishes, then chose three new bishops who were not previously from Wilfrid’s diocese to oversee the newly made dioceses. Bosa, a monk from the Whitby diocese, was made bishop of Deira, Eata, a prior at Lindisfarne, was made bishop of Bernicia, and the third diocese was established for the seat at Lindsey, which was extremely unstable throughout the seventh century.¹⁵

Bishop Wilfrid was outraged with the decision of the king and the Archbishop and he sought help from the Apostolic See in Rome.¹⁶ After a three-year-long journey, Wilfrid returned to Northumbria with the declaration made by a special synod held in Rome. The synod concluded that Wilfrid should have back his bishopric in its entirety exactly as it was before it was taken away from him.¹⁷ When Wilfrid returned home in 680, he showed the

decree by the Apostolic See to Ecgrith and the other people gathered there for his return. The onlookers claimed that the document was a fake and that Wilfrid had purchased the document while in Rome. King Ecgrith and his Council then had Wilfrid put in prison for nine months. Eddius says that when Ecgrith finally opened and read the document of the Apostolic See (a *see* is attributed to one or more of the apostles of Jesus); he had Wilfrid locked up in solitary confinement and did not allow him any visitors. Then, according to Eddius, Iurminburgh took Wilfrid's reliquary and wore it as her own decoration both at home and while traveling.¹⁸

Bede's story of the expulsion of Wilfrid from his *see* by Ecgrith is a bit different from Eddius' account. Bede says that when Wilfrid returned to Britain after his travels to Rome and elsewhere, he was not welcome in his homeland of Northumbria, so he sought refuge in the kingdom of the South Saxons. At this time, Bede says, the South Saxons were still pagans, but it did not take long for Wilfrid to convert them to Christianity. In this story, Bede also interjects a miracle story, claiming that the land of the South Saxons had been without rain for three years prior to the arrival of Wilfrid. After the heathens accepted Christ and were baptized, rain immediately fell upon the land. After this good fortune, the South Saxons loved and revered Wilfrid and the king of the South Saxons, Æthelwealh, gave land to Wilfrid and his followers. This land was called Selsey and upon it Wilfrid and his followers built a monastery where they could administer the faith properly to the South Saxons.¹⁹ It is apparent from both Eddius and Bede that Wilfrid was a well-liked man throughout Britain, with the exception of King Ecgrith and his Queen Iurminburgh.

When King Oswiu died in 670, Ecgrith, his son, took the throne and ruled over the Kingdom of Northumbria for fifteen years. Sawyer claims that the relationship between the Northumbrians and the Picts probably began to deteriorate in 662, following the death of the Pictish King Talorcan, Eanfrith's son. The final collapse of relations between the two kingdoms occurred with the death of Oswiu, when "Ecgrith appears to have behaved in a very highhanded manner towards his father's friends."²⁰ Upon his succession to the throne, Ecgrith immediately began his reign of domination over the northern neighbors of the Northumbrians, the Picts.²¹ Sally Foster claims that Pictland was

under the control of the Angles from 653-685, usually through the installment of puppet kings.²² Eddius Stephanus, in the following passage, demonstrates just how fierce and powerful King Ecgrith was when he describes his attempt to put down a Pictish revolt:

For in his early years, while the kingdom was still weak, the bestial tribes of the Picts had a fierce contempt for subjection to the Saxon and threatened to throw off from themselves the yoke of slavery; they gathered together innumerable tribes from every nook and corner in the north, and as a swarm of ants in the summer sweeping from their hills heap up a mound to protect their tottering house. When king Ecgrith heard this, lowly as he was among his own people and magnanimous towards his enemies, he forthwith got together a troop of horsemen, for he was no lover of belated operations; and trusting in God like Judas Maccabaeus and assisted by the brave sub-king, Beornhaeth, he attacked with his little band of God's people an enemy host which was vast and moreover concealed. He slew an enormous number of the people, filling two rivers with corpses, so that, marvelous to relate, the slayers, passing over the rivers dry foot, pursued and slew the crowd of fugitives; the tribes were reduced to slavery and remained subject under the yoke of captivity until the time the king was slain.²³

After the battle, not only was an entire Pictish army destroyed but many of the Pictish aristocracy had also been killed.²⁴ This revolt by the Picts would not be the last incident Ecgrith would have to deal with from his northern neighbors. Although there is no definite date given for this battle, it occurred, according to Eddius, early in Ecgrith's reign, probably around 672. From this passage, it is clear that Ecgrith's power had moved beyond the Firth of Forth because the Picts were his subjects. The Northumbrians probably forced the Picts into slavery sometime during King Oswiu's reign. Therefore, when Ecgrith became king, the Picts saw their chance to free themselves from the unwanted subjection of their people by the Northumbrians before the new king had time to establish himself. Kirby writes that the Pictish revolt may also be associated with the removal of the King of the Picts, Drest, in 672.²⁵ This proposition made by Kirby suggests that perhaps Drest was a puppet king to the Northumbrian

kingdom, which would be a sensible reason for wanting him thrown out of office.

The Picts were not the only business Ecgrith had to immediately attend to when he first took the throne. Ecgrith was also left with the legacy of ill will from the Mercian kingdom, a position Oswiu had passed down to his son.²⁶ When Penda's son, Wulfhere, was proclaimed King of Mercia in 657, King Oswiu's "overlordship in southern England" was obliterated.²⁷ Stenton claims that by 665, Wulfhere's power had reached as far as the middle Thames and he held as his subjects the kings of Essex. Wulfhere, like his father, had a deep hatred for the Northumbrian kingdom, because they were both neighbors and warrior kingdoms, they fought perpetually for nearby land. Eddius records a battle between Ecgrith and Wulfhere, which occurred between the years 673-675:

Now Wulfhere, king of the Mercians, proud of heart and insatiable in spirit, roused all the southern nations against our kingdom, intent not merely on fighting but on compelling them to pay tribute in a slavish spirit. But he was not guided by God. So Ecgrith, King of Deira and Bernicia, unwavering in spirit and true hearted, on the advice of his counsellors trusted God, like Barak and Deborah, to guard his land and defend the churches of God even as the bishop taught him to do, and with a band of men no greater than theirs attacked a proud enemy, and by the help of God overthrew them with his tiny force. Countless numbers were slain, the king was put to flight and his kingdom laid under tribute, and afterwards, when Wulfhere died through some cause, Ecgrith ruled in peace over a wider realm.²⁸

After the defeat of Wulfhere, the Mercian province of Lindsey, just south of Deira, fell to Ecgrith and Northumbria.²⁹ With Lindsey now a part of Northumbria, King Ecgrith controlled the larger part of the east coast of Britain. Stenton says:

It is possible that for a short time Ecgrith, like each of his three predecessors, was recognized as overlord in Mercia itself. But his supremacy, if ever admitted, left no impression on Mercian history."³⁰

Eddius suggests that the Mercians were made to pay tribute to

Ecgrith and the Northumbrians after the defeat of Wulfhere, which was not an unusual practice.³¹ Within a couple of years following his defeat, Wulfhere died, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the year 675: “In this year Wulfhere, the son of Penda, and Aescwine fought at Biedanheafde; and in the same year Wulfhere dies and Ethelred³² succeeded to the kingdom.”³³ However, the death of Wulfhere did not mean the end to Ecgrith’s troubles with Mercia.

It seems that Æthelred, Wulfhere’s successor to the kingdom of Mercia, was successful in regaining the kingdom of Lindsey, which they had lost to Ecgrith around 674. Bede briefly gives mention of the battle which occurred between Ecgrith and Æthelred in 679: “In the ninth year of King Ecgrith’s reign a great battle was fought between him and Æthelred, king of the Mercians, near the river Trent, and Aelfwine, brother of King Ecgrith, was killed, a young man of about eighteen years of age and much beloved in both kingdoms.”³⁴ Bede also claims that after the battle, in which Ecgrith was defeated, Archbishop Theodore restored the peace between the two kings and their kingdoms.³⁵ However, Frank Stenton tells the story a bit more realistically than Bede’s, he writes more candidly that, “The battle of the Trent proved to be one of the decisive incidents in early English history, for Ecgrith never again attempted to conquer any part of southern England, and his successors were kept from adventures in the south by new dangers which threatened their northern border.”³⁶ This meant that now that the southern kingdoms were no longer an immediate issue, Ecgrith could concentrate his animosity towards his other neighbors the Picts and the Scots.

The *Annals of Ulster* records a battle between the Saxons and the Irish in the year 684: “The Saxons lay waste Mag Breg, and many churches, in the month of June.”³⁷ Bede gives a grisly account of Ecgrith’s conquest into Ireland to fight against the Scots:

In the Year of our Lord 684 Ecgrith, king of Northumbria, sent an army to Ireland under his ealdormen Berht, who wretchedly devastated a harmless race that had always been most friendly to the English, and his hostile bands spared neither churches nor monasteries. The islanders resisted force by force so far as they were able, imploring the merciful aid of God and invoking His vengeance with

unceasing imprecations.³⁸

This is one battle that Ecgrith fought which it seems Bede does not give his approval. Colgrave and Mynors put forward the notion that Ecgrith probably attacked the Scots in their homeland in an attempt to quell any possibility of them supporting their people living in Britain, since Ecgrith was believed to have been the overlord of the Scots in Argyll.³⁹ Stenton also follows this line of reasoning: "It is possible that this expedition was intended to intimidate tribes which might have supported the Irish of northern Britain."⁴⁰ Alfred Smyth claims that Ecgrith's hatred of the Irish was twofold:

The first was that they had given refuge to his estranged and exiled brother, Aldfrith (later king of Northumbria, 685-705), and the second that they had taken in the most dangerous element in the kingdom of Rheged¹¹³ - those dispossessed warriors who made up the elite of the house of Urien.⁴¹

Apparently, British war bands from northern Britain had been visiting the eastern coastline of Ireland between the years 682 to 709. Smyth claims that the fact that they were even in Ireland implies that there was "a major political upheaval in northern Britain" during this time, which suggests Ecgrith's upheaval of and control over Rheged.⁴² As for Aldfrith, Ecgrith's half-brother, his mother was Fina,⁴³ an Irish princess from the northern Ui Neill area. Aldfrith was called *Flann Fina* by the Irish, which means 'blood of the wine'. At the time Ecgrith invaded the Irish, Aldfrith was either living on Iona or somewhere within Ireland itself.⁴⁴ Regardless of Ecgrith's motives for attacking the Irish in Ireland, the fact remains that Aldfrith was, illegitimate or not, the rightful successor to the kingdom of Northumbria. Therefore, in the eyes of Ecgrith, Aldfrith stood as a threat to his kingdom.

It is, perhaps, Ecgrith's paranoid tendencies that cause him to return to Pictland in an attempt to reassert his control over them. Although Peter Marren offers no factual reason for Ecgrith's returns to Pictland, he puts forth the notion that: "How and why he was provoked into making a second punitive expedition into the land of the Picts is uncertain. There had, presumably, been some form of rebellion against Northumbria on a scale which

required the king's personal intervention.”⁴⁵ However, this time his desire for total domination would cost him his life. Bede believes that death was the punishment Ecgrith received for his unnecessary attack on the Irish:

Indeed the very next year the king rashly took an army to ravage the kingdom of the Picts, against the urgent advice of his friends and particularly of Cuthbert, of blessed memory, who had recently been made bishop. The enemy feigned flight and lured the king into some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains; there he was killed with the greater part of the forces he had taken with him, on 20 May, in the fortieth year of his age and the fifteenth of his reign. As I have said, his friends urged him not to undertake this campaign; but in the previous year he had refused to listen to the holy father Egbert, who had urged him not to attack the Irish who had done him no harm; and the punishment for his sin was that he would not now listen to those who sought to save him from his own destruction.⁴⁶

The prophecy of Ecgrith's death is recorded in the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert* in Chapter 6. The story is told that Abbess Ælfflaed, Ecgrith's sister, called for Cuthbert to come and meet with her at Coquet Island. After much pageantry, Ælfflaed finally asked Cuthbert to tell her how long her brother Ecgrith was going to live. Cuthbert, after indirectly addressing the issue with several pithy philosophical statements, answered the abbess that the king would die within the year. When she had accepted this news, she implored Cuthbert to tell her who Ecgrith's heir would be. Cuthbert then wearily responded that the heir to the Northumbrian throne would be his brother, who lived on an island at sea. Ælfflaed immediately knew that this meant Aldfrith would be Ecgrith's successor, because he was living on Iona.⁴⁷

The anonymous monk also tells a story about when Cuthbert went to Carlisle to visit the queen while the deadly battle against the Picts was taking place in the year 685:

At the time when King Ecgrith was ravaging and laying waste the kingdom of the Picts, though finally in accordance with the predestined judgement of God he he was to be overcome and slain, our holy bishop went to the city of Carlisle to visit the queen who was awaiting there the issue of

events. On the Saturday, as the priests and deacons declare of whom many still survive, at the ninth hour they were looking at the city wall and the well formerly built in a wonderful manner by the Romans, as Waga the reeve of the city, who was conducting them, explained. The bishop meanwhile stood learning on his supporting staff, with his head inclined towards the ground and then he lifted up his eyes heavenwards again with a sigh and said: "Oh! oh! oh! I think that the war is over and that the judgement has been given against our people in the battle."⁴⁸

Bede's description is almost verbatim to that of the *Anonymous* account of Cuthbert's disturbance at the exact moment of Ecgrith's death. However, in Chapter 27 of Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, he tells that Cuthbert was "suddenly troubled in spirit" while he was viewing a Roman fountain. When Cuthbert announced solemnly that the battle was over, a nearby priest asked him how he knew for sure. Cuthbert then asked the priest if he did not notice the change in the weather. Cuthbert then went to speak with the queen and he urged her to go back to the royal city because the king may already be dead and her presence there would surely be required. Cuthbert told the queen that he would follow her home after he conducted some church business in a nearby town the next day.⁴⁹

For whatever reason Ecgrith decided to attack the Picts again, it seems that he was determined to control the valuable real estate between the Forth and the Mounth. Whoever controlled this land had the capability to control all of what would later be known as Scotland. This land was also good for agricultural purposes, not to mention the possibility of slave labor for the Northumbrians. However, unfortunately for Ecgrith he underestimated the dangers he faced in those mountains belonging to the Picts.⁵⁰ Peter Marren writes; "There is no evidence that he maintained garrisoned forts and lines of communication, and he seems to have relied mainly on terror to assert his overlordship."⁵¹ Although his father was an exile to Pictland in his youth, Ecgrith probably had never traveled so far north before the battle. However, he probably had some notion about what to expect from the lay of the land and its rivers, as well as the remains of the Roman roads and forts set into the hills.⁵² Marren even suggests that perhaps Ecgrith intended to use the same strategy he had

used in 672 to defeat the Picts the first time.

Regardless of Ecgfrith's reason for reentering Pictland himself at the behest of his trusted friends, the fact remains that he died on the twentieth of May in the year 685. This Battle at Dunnichen Moss, commonly known as Nechtansmere, would prove to be a decisive battle in the future of Northumbria. Bede writes that; "From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to 'ebb and fall away'."⁵³

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pictish Royal Line

One of the most interesting things about the history of the Pictish nation is their origin story. Bede writes of how the Picts came to be inhabitants of the British Isles, claiming that they came originally from Scythia. Setting out in their warships from this distant land, the Picts were steered on by a violent wind that guided them to the northern-most coast of Britain. After sailing around the island of Britain, the Picts landed on the northern-most coast of Ireland. Upon first meeting the Irish, the Picts requested permission to stay in Ireland where their ships had landed. Unfortunately, the Irish refused the request of the Picts claiming that their island was not large enough for both groups of people. However, they did offer the Picts an alternative; the Irish told of another island to the east of theirs, which was easily viewed on days when the weather permitted distant visibility. The Irish then offered to aid the Picts if anyone should resist their settlement of the nearby island. The Picts crossed the small distance of ocean separating the two islands and they came to occupy the northern half of the island, which is now known as Scotland. The Britons, Bede claims, already occupied the southern region of Britain. Therefore, with their new land secured, the Picts inquired of their Irish neighbors for women, because they had brought none with them on their journey. The Irish agreed and gave the Picts women so that they could make families and a future for their people in their new home. However, the Irish had one stipulation regarding the newcomers request for women, if the Picts should ever have trouble in deciding who should rule their kingdom then the ruler should be chosen from the female royal line, instead of the male line.¹ Thus is the origin of how the Picts came to inhabit northern Britain according to Bede.

Although the origin story of how the Picts came to inhabit Britain is not the primary goal of this book, it does perhaps

indicate that the Picts had some sort of friendly relationship with their Irish neighbors. The story told by Bede is also perhaps the reason for the belief that the Picts practiced matrilineal succession, which is widely accepted among some scholars and hotly debated among others. The succession debate is simply one argument in a complex history of a group of people whose history Frank Stenton claims is “utterly obscure.”² The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the Pictish royal house in the seventh century, culminating with the Pictish king, Bridei, and his defeat of the Northumbrians at Dunnichen Moss in 685. Before the discussion is undertaken, it must be pointed out that the history of the Picts is extremely fragmentary. The contemporary information written about the Picts relies exclusively upon the writings of people from outside the Pictish kingdom, because apparently the Picts kept no written records. Sally Foster says that there is only one source that can tentatively be described as Pictish, a king-list, which records the Pictish kings and the lengths of their reign.³ Because contemporary sources are so scant, it is difficult to gain a full understanding of the Picts. However, it is possible to gain a glimpse of the political climate during the seventh century through English sources, like Bede and Eddius. Although, one must keep in mind that these are generally ecclesiastical and hagiographical, therefore their true purpose usually leans toward specific religious purposes rather than the recording of actual events for the purpose of history. Often, Bede and Eddius forgo any side of the story that does not benefit the English nation or the Church.

The exact political structure of Pictland will probably never be known. However, one must assume that their structure did not differ too much from their neighbors. Sally Foster says that; “The early historic period is characterized throughout the British Isles by the emergence of warlike, heroic kings who ruled over defined territories (even though we may not now recognize their precise boundaries).”⁴ As for specific kingdom boundaries, the most we can hope for comes from Bede, for he speaks of the kingdom of Pictland in terms of a northern and southern kingdom. When Bede gives the story of the coming of Columba to Britain he says that:

... he came to Britain to preach the word of God to the kingdoms of the northern Picts which are separated from the

southern part of their land by steep and rugged mountains. The southern Picts who live on this side of the mountains had, so it is said, long ago given up the errors of idolatry and received the true faith through the preaching of the Word by that reverend and holy man Bishop Ninian.⁵

Foster believes that the transformation of Pictland from small individually controlled kingdoms to the “centralization of authority over far-flung territories” was a slow process that took place throughout the fifth to the ninth centuries.⁶ However, by the close of the seventh century, “a Pictish political entity was recognized by neighboring countries.”⁷

The Pictish political situation beginning in the mid-seventh century is an interesting one characterized by kings who may or may not have been strictly of Pictish decent. Talorcan, who is identified as the son of Eanfrith, son of Æthelfrith, once King of Bernicia, is the first king of the Picts who came from outside of the province of Pictland. While Eanfrith was living as an exile among the Picts, during the reign of Edwin, he apparently had a relationship with a Pictish princess, which produced Talorcan.

M.O Anderson writes that a daughter was also born from this Pictish/Northumbrian marriage. Anderson states that the children were born sometime shortly after the year 616.⁸ Apparently, Æthelfrith had arranged a royal marriage between the Pictish princess and his son Eanfrith, producing a formal, perhaps political, relationship between the Picts and their southern neighbors the Northumbrians.⁹ The princess Eanfrith married was sister to the king of the Picts Gartnait, son of Uuid, who reigned from 637-641.¹⁰ Anderson suggests that the princess had three brothers, all children of Uuid, who ruled one after the other from the year 631 until the year 653 when the last brother died. Therefore, Anderson points out that when the brothers were gone, their sister’s child Talorcan, son of Eanfrith, was chosen to rule the Pictish kingdom.¹¹

It is unclear whether or not Talorcan was chosen in 653 to rule the kingdom of the Picts through the lineage of his mother, therefore, lending evidence to the matrilineal succession practiced by the Picts, or if he was simply chosen because he was the nephew to the three previous kings. Another reason for the succession of Talorcan to the Pictish throne could have been that he was the only remaining male heir in the royal house of Uuid.

Molly Miller suggests that Talorcan may have indeed been the rightful heir to the Pictish throne, succeeding Talorc IV.¹² Talorc IV was a son of Uuid and king of the Picts from 641-653.¹³ Miller says that the name Talorcan is a diminutive of its proper form spelled Talorc. Therefore, claims Miller, Talorcan was “designated ‘young Talorc’ to distinguish him from Talorc IV during that king’s lifetime: so he may have been the recognized heir.”¹⁴ Alex Woolf agrees with Miller’s statement, but he adds that Talorcan probably grew up in Pictland and because his father was a foreigner, Talorcan would have been a “*glasfhine*.”¹⁵ According to Woolf, as *glasfhine* is an Irish term meaning literally “grey kin” and defined as a child born of a foreign parent to a native parent. With this type of relationship in mind, Woolf believes that Talorcan may “have been entitled to the rights of his mother’s partilineage.”¹⁶

A.P. Smyth says of the reign of Talorcan that: “Unfortunately the circumstances surrounding the reign of this king are so special that his rule in Pictland cannot be used to prove the matrilinear thesis.”¹⁷ He says that there is every reason to believe, based on the factual evidence that Talorcan was chosen to rule Pictland by his uncle Oswiu, therefore, making him a Northumbrian puppet king. Therefore, Smyth concludes that, “Talorgen ruled, not by virtue of matrilinear claims as such, but by virtue of his standing as the son of Oswiu’s brother.”¹⁸ Oswiu, King of the Northumbrians, evidently held some part of southern Pictland under his sway during his reign because according to Bede, in the year 669, Wilfrid was overseeing the Northumbrians as well as the Picts.¹⁹ The fact that Oswiu was sending a bishop to administer to the Picts indicates that he had some claim to part of their province, otherwise he would have had no interest in the salvation of his neighbors. Oswiu would probably not have wasted the money on the Picts, having English clerics administer the faith to them, if he were not receiving some sort of profit from them, otherwise known as tribute. With this in mind, Smyth argues that it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Talorcan was simply a faction in Oswiu’s plan to expand the kingdom of Northumbria into southern Pictland.²⁰

The accession to the Pictish throne of Talorcan in 653, seems to have brought the Northumbrians and the southern Picts closer together than they had been before, which lends credence to Smyth’s theory that Talorcan was installed as a puppet king by

Oswiu. With the Northumbrians southern threat, the Mercians, no longer an issue, Oswiu was free to “exert great influence on Talorcan’s ‘election’, and would be able to commission panegyrists and poets, jewelers, weavers, and armourers, to present Talorcan and his household (and himself as the head of Talorcan’s paternal kindred) in the most magnificent possible way.”²¹ However, the good tidings that existed between the two kingdoms were short lived. Some scholars hypothesize that it is the death of Talorcan in 657, that initiated the deterioration of the relationship between Northumbria and the Picts.²² Both Smyth and Kirby agree that after the death of Talorcan, Oswiu may have launched an attack on the Picts and ruled the Pictish kingdom interregnum between the years 665-6.²³ During this time of possible interregnum, a successor to the Pictish throne emerged, whose name was Drest. Drest reigned over Pictland for a few years until the Picts threw him out of office.²⁴ The *Annals of Ulster* records that the “expulsion of Drost from the kingship” of the Picts occurred in the year 672.²⁵ The expulsion of Drest by his own people indicates that he was probably also a puppet king to Oswiu, since the Picts waited until Oswiu died to expel him. Molly Miller claims that a clue to the reason behind the expulsion of Drest from the kingdom of the Picts is found in the *Annals of Ulster* under the year 664.²⁶ The *Annals of Ulster* records that “the battle of Luith Feirn,” which is in Fortrenn, took place in 664.²⁷ Miller says that Luith Feirn has yet to be identified, “. . . but Fortriu was one of the most important of the Pictish provinces (comprising the later areas of Strathearn and Menteith), bordering Dalriada on the west, Strathclyde on the south, and (by now) Northumbria on the south-east.”²⁸ Miller points out that the Picts themselves would have definitely comprised one-half of the faction fighting the battle, but whether or not other Picts represented the other faction or some neighboring group of people is unknown.²⁹ Therefore, the expulsion of Drest definitely marks a further decline in the friendship between the Picts and the Northumbrians, but it may also represent some sort of internal division amongst the Picts themselves. Sawyer claims that the waning friendship was destroyed altogether after the death of Oswiu in 670, when his son Ecgfrith took the Northumbrian throne.³⁰

Any other information regarding the life and reign of Talorcan is fragmentary and is usually found in the Irish annals. For

instance, we know from the *Annals of Tighernach* that he fought with the Scots of Dalriada in the year 654: “The battle of Strath Ethart by Talartach, the son of Anfrait, king of the Cruithne, in which Duncan, the son of Conan, and Congal, the son of Ronan, were slain.”³¹ John Bannerman believes that Strath Ethart had to be located somewhere within Scotland because Talorcan was the king of the Picts at that time.³² If Bannerman’s assumption is correct and the battle was fought on Pictish soil, then perhaps it was the Scots who were the aggressors, however, the fact that Talorcan and the Picts defeated the Scots is all that will ever be known of the event. There is no information regarding the reason the battle occurred nor the implications the outcome of the battle had on either the Picts or the Scots. Because Talorcan only ruled for four years, it is possible that this battle against the Scots is the only major campaign he waged. The *Annals of Tighernach* records “The death of Tolarcan, son of Ainfrith, King of the Picts,” in the year 657.³³ The cause of the death of Talorcan is not recorded anywhere, therefore we will never know if it was an untimely departure or if it occurred from natural causes.

Talorcan’s sister, whose name is lost, had a daughter with the lord of Dunnichen when she was about eighteen years of age.³⁴ Anderson points out that this does not mean that he was the King of Circhenn, but he was definitely of high social status within the Pictish community.³⁵ The daughter of Talorcan’s sister, or rather his niece, married Bile when she came of age. Bile, also spelled Beli, later became king of the Strathclyde Britons, ruling at the place known as Dumbarton. Talorcan’s niece and the King of Dumbarton had two children, a boy and a girl. The son was named Bridei, also spelled Brude, who later became king of the Picts. Upon the death of his great-uncle Talorgen in 657, Bridei would have presumably still have been very young; therefore, he would probably not have known anything of the political climate at that time. Anderson writes that at some point, Talorcan’s sister remarried a man by the name of Donuel, who might have possibly been the “Lord of Dunnichen,” but not likely.³⁶ Donuel, Anderson proposes, could have also been the king of the Irish of Dal Riata, known as Domnall Brecc. Talorcan’s sister and Donuel had three children, two boys and a girl. Gartnait and Drest were the names of their male offspring and the two ruled as king over the Picts after the death of their uncle Talorcan, Gartnait being the first to

take the throne in 657.³⁷ Kirby writes that if the father of Gartnait and Drest “could be securely identified as Domnall Brecc, formerly king of Dal Riata, Gartnait and Drest could perhaps be viewed as the beneficiaries of an alliance between the Scots and the northern Angles against the Picts; but Donuel’s identification with Domnall Brecc is not certain.”³⁸ There is, however, one thing that these three kings had in common writes Anderson, and that is that they “were apparently obliged to acknowledge the overlordship of their kinsman Oswiu, Eanfrith’s younger brother and king of Northumbria, to whom they probably paid tribute.”³⁹

Upon the expulsion of Drest from the throne in Pictland, Bridei mac Bile succeeded to the throne as king of the Picts. Bridei is the second Pictish king whose father appears to have been a foreigner.⁴⁰ Bridei, also called Brude, is called “king of Foirtriu,” upon his death recorded in *The Annals of Ulster* in the year 692.⁴¹ M.O. Anderson writes that it is possible that the phrase ‘king of Fortrenn’ may be taken as the king of the Picts, meaning all of the Picts, but she says, “I think this very doubtful.”⁴² A.P Smyth claims that there is no evidence that Bridei had a Pictish mother.⁴³ Smyth says Bridei was a cousin to Ecgrith, King of the Northumbrians, probably through Talorcan’s mother, who is definitely Pictish.⁴⁴ Smyth also claims that it is possible that Bridei and Ecgrith were related through Oswiu, who married a woman from the British dynasty of Rheged named Riemmelth, whose father was a chieftain named Royth. Another suggestion by Smyth is that Æthelfrith, Ecgrith’s grandfather, may have been married to a woman from the Strathclyde dynasty, therefore linking Ecgrith and Bridei.⁴⁵ The marriage of Oswiu to the British chieftain’s daughter is recorded in Nennius’ *British History*, under the northern history section where he writes: “Oswy had two wives, one of whom was called Rieinmellt, daughter of Royth, son of Rhun.”⁴⁶ Recorded also in his genealogy of the Northumbrians, Nennius says that Ecgrith and Bridei were cousins; however, he does not say how they are related.⁴⁷

Smyth says that since Bridei’s authority lies “in the fact that he was the son of Bili Neithons’s son, King of the Strathclyde Britons, and that his brother, Owen (Eugein), was that powerful Strathclyde king who slew Domnall Brecc, King of Scots Dal Riata, in the Battle of Strathcarron about 642.”⁴⁸ This battle was a critical factor in the decline of the power of the Scots whom in the

time of the King Aedan mac Gabhrain, ruling the Scots in the late sixth century, were a powerful force to contend with. Stenton says; “The Irish of Argyll had never found another chief like Aedan. In the seventh century they were generally subject to one or other of the stronger northern peoples, and their importance in the history of the time rests on their possession of the sanctuary of Iona.”⁴⁹ Therefore, Smyth says, after the battle of Strathcarron, the Scots were no longer primary competition for the Picts and the Northumbrians in the race to dominate northern Britain.⁵⁰ Owen’s defeat of the Scots hampered Dal Riata’s expansion for some time, but the outcome of the Battle for the Strathclyde Britons was a positive one that helped them become, in the first half of the seventh century, “the premier kingdom in the north, since Pictland was falling more and more under the influence of Northumbria.”⁵¹ However, even the powerful Britons of Strathclyde could not defend themselves against the seemingly invincible Angles to the south. According to Stenton, the Britons shared a fate no different from that of the neighbors the Scots and the Picts, who at one time they could have possibly dominated: “There can be no doubt that Oswiu and Ecgfrith annexed much Pictish territory to the Northumbrian kingdom, and that Ecgfrith in his later years was recognized as overlord by the Irish of Argyll and the Britons of Strathclyde.”⁵²

Bridei’s rise to power coincides with two main events in Pictish history in the year 672: the expulsion of the Pictish King Drest and the defeat of the Picts by Ecgfrith.⁵³ The battle waged on the Picts by King Ecgfrith is recorded in Chapter 19 of Eddius Stephanus’ *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*.⁵⁴ This defeat by Ecgfrith, claims Smyth, surely left the Picts in a very dangerous situation, being without a leader or significant reinforcements.⁵⁵ Therefore, the Kingdom of the Picts was left vulnerable to the powerful Britons of Strathclyde and the more powerful Northumbrians until Bridei took the throne. Although the Pictish kingdom was in a weakened state when Bridei took the throne, it appears that he wasted no time asserting his control over southern Pictland. The *Annals of Ulster* for example record that in the year 682, “. . . the Orkneys were destroyed by Bruide.”⁵⁶ M.O. Anderson implies that if Bridei was responsible for the takeover of Dunnottar in the year 680, which would have been an assertion of power over the area known as Circhenn.⁵⁷ Perhaps Bridei’s most awesome display of

power came in the year 685, when he defeated the Northumbrians at the Battle of Nechtansmere.

King Bridei would be the man responsible for freeing his people from the shackles of the Angles, but he was also the man who freed his neighbors the Britons and the Scots. The decisive blow to the Angles was dealt on Pictish soil, by King Bridei and his people in the year 685. The defeat King Ecgfrith and the Northumbrians suffered at Dunnichen Moss was believed by Bede to have been “punishment for his sin,” that is repercussion for his attack on the Irish “who had done him no harm” the year before.⁵⁸ The death of Ecgfrith was liberating for all the people of the north and it was the underdog Kingdom of the Picts who was responsible for the glorious victory. Bede records the outcome of the battle in a rather dramatic tone:

From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ‘ebb and fall away’. For the Picts recovered their own land which the English had formerly held, while the Irish who lived in Britain and some part of the British nation recovered their independence, which they have now enjoyed for about forty-six years. Many of the English were either slain by the sword or enslaved or escaped by flight from the Pictish territory.⁵⁹

CHAPTER SIX

The Battle of Dunnichen

To the modern observer, the site of the Battle of Dunnichen, also called the Battle of Nechtansmere, and referred to, as “the best documented event in the history of the Picts,”¹ appears to be a working farmstead. Although the site of the battle remains uncertain, historians today commonly agree that it took place in the modern town of Dunnichen, which is just outside Forfar, near the A-94. Dunnichen is a small village approximately ten miles from the east shores of Scotland. The only indication that anything significant in the history of Scotland ever happen there is simply written on a tall stone memorial that reads: “To commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the Battle of Nechtansmere 20 May 685 AD when the Picts, under king Brudei decisively defeated the Northumbrians under king Ecgrith.”² The stone is placed outside the walls of the church at Dunnichen and overlooks the proposed site of the battle.

It is easy to drive past the monument at Dunnichen because it blended in perfectly to the scenery. Across the church parking lot rests the monument. There is a Pictish stone at Aberlemno that depicts a battle, possibly the Battle of Dunnichen.³ The monument erected on behalf of the Battle of Dunnichen has an inscription on the stone honoring the Battle of Nechtansmere. The importance of that stone is not so obvious, but the reasoning is stark: It may be that if Bridei had not stopped the expansion of the Northumbrians, Scotland may have never existed. The history of the Picts would have become English history and the Pictish identity, that would later make Scotland, would be defunct. It is a wonder that why King Bridei is obscure and not a household name. It could be the fact that the Scottish countryside is dotted with these obscure Pictish stones and they are so familiar to its inhabitants that they have become invisible. F.T. Wainwright’s sentiment regarding the subject of the Battle of Dunnichen:

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of the battle. It is traditionally regarded as the turning-point in Northumbrian fortunes, as marking the transference of political supremacy in the north from the Northumbrian to the Pictish kings, and as scoring across History the decision that what is now Scotland should be essentially a Pictish not an English kingdom. To believe this is to ignore later history and to confuse cause with effect. To say that the north would have become an Anglian province if Ecgrith had won the Battle of Nechtansmere is less accurate than to say that the north might have become part of the Northumbrian kingdom if Ecgrith and the Northumbrians had had sufficient strength to win the Battle of Nechtansmere.⁴

The Battle of Nechtansmere is important because it marked the turning point in the history of the Picts and even if it did not mark the end of the Kingdom of Northumbria, it definitely dealt a blow to their plan of total domination over their northern neighbors. Not only is this possibly the best documented event in the history of the Picts, but it also allowed them to overthrow the Northumbrian rule and the dark shadow it cast over all northern peoples, the Scots and Britons included.

Although the battle is mentioned in several sources, none give extensive details. However, almost all of the sources give the date of the battle, which is Saturday, the 20th of May 685. The Irish chronicle, *The Annals of Ulster*, records this about the battle in the year 685: "The battle of Dun Nechtain was fought on Saturday, May 20th, and Egfrid son of Oswy, king of the Saxons, who had completed the 15th year of his reign, was slain therein with a great body of his soldiers."⁵ The *Annals of Tigernach* also record the battle between Bridei and Ecgrith in the year 685: "The battle of Dunnichen took place on the twentieth day of the month of May, on Saturday; and there Ecgrith, Oswiu's son, king of the Saxons, was killed (after completing the fifteenth year of his reign), with a great company of his soldiers, by Brude, son of Bile, the king of Fortriu."⁶ F.T. Wainwright says that it is from these and other Irish chronicles that we get "the name that means the most to a modern reader," which is commonly known as the Battle of Dunnichen.⁷ Wainwright suggests that the Irish chroniclers received their information about northern Britain via Iona. Bede records this

about the island of Iona:

Columba came to Britain when Bridius the son of Malcolm, a most powerful king, had been ruling over the Picts for over eight years. Columba turned them to the faith of Christ by his words and example and so received the island of Iona from them in order to establish a monastery there. It is not a large island, being only about five hides in English reckoning. His successors hold it to this day and he himself was buried there at the age of seventy-seven, about thirty-two years after he came to Britain to preach.⁸

Another statement made by Bede, pertaining to the monastery at Iona, gives a glimpse of the importance of the monastic center in regards to its relationship with the rest of Britain: “This island always has an abbot for its ruler who is a priest, to whose authority the whole kingdom, including even bishops, have to be subject.”⁹ Therefore, it is not as far-fetched as it may seem that such an important monastery would have had such a flourishing *scriptorium*. The information that passed through the *scriptorium* would have also probably been somewhat accurate, since the men who lived there would have probably traveled extensively throughout Britain and would have been up-to-date on the latest happenings, especially battles. Leslie Alcock, for instance, says that the Irish analysts were definitely recording the battle accurately since Adomnan would have learned of the battle himself first hand from Northumbrian sources. Perhaps Adomnan learned the events of the battle from his friend, the successor to Ecgrith; Aldfrith.¹⁰ Adomnan himself records his visit to the Kingdom of Northumbria while the plague was raging there: “when we visited our friend king Aldfrith, while the pestilence still continued and devastated many villages on all sides. But both in our first visit, after the battle of Ecfrith, and two years later, although we walked in the midst of this danger of plague, the Lord so delivered us that not even one of our companions died.”¹¹ With this in mind, Alcock says that the *Annals of Ulster* is “a record which had most probably been consigned to writing within two years of the event,” therefore marking its authenticity.¹²

Leslie Alcock, in agreement with Wainwright, also believes that the Irish analysts received their information regarding the battle from the *scriptorium* located on Iona.¹³ However,

Wainwright adds, the Irish analysts would have been, and in most cases were, familiar with writers from Britain like Bede.¹⁴ Because Bede does not give the name of the battle, nor the place in which it was fought, the name must have come through some other source, like a script from the *scriptorium* at Iona perhaps.

Regardless, if Alcock's assessment of Adomnan is correct, then the Irish *Annals of Ulster* precedes Bede. Perhaps, now one may assume that Bede received his information from the Irish analysts instead of the other way around. But it must be noted that Bede would have been a young boy growing up in Northumbria at the time of the battle, so he would have probably had some recollection of such a momentous occasion and with the history of the oral tradition in the early medieval period, he would have heard the story frequently. Whatever the source of the Irish analysts, the length of Ecgrith's reign and the date of the battle are consistent throughout all the records.

The *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, written sometime between the years 699- 705, records an interesting account of the battle. In the passage regarding the battle, Cuthbert has gone to Carlisle to be with Ecgrith's queen, Iurminburgh, while they awaited the outcome of the battle.¹⁵ While Cuthbert was touring the town and viewing some of the remains of a Roman wall, he suddenly had a vision of the outcome of the battle. When the other men touring with Cuthbert urged him to tell them what his vision had revealed and what the outcome of the battle was, the holy man said evasively: "Oh, my sons, look at the sky, consider how wonderful it is, and think how inscrutable are the judgments of God" and so forth.¹⁶ And so after a few days they learned that it had been announced far and wide that a wretched and mournful battle had taken place at the very day and hour in which it had been revealed to him."¹⁷ Although this record of the battle is more concerned with the vision of St. Cuthbert, the seriousness of the outcome of the Battle of Dunnichen is clearly conveyed.

Eddius Stephanus wrote his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* sometime before 720,¹⁸ and in it he gives a slightly more detailed account of the battle that occurred between the Picts and the Northumbrians: "At last the news came to them of a most woeful disaster in which Ecgrith, king of the Northumbrians, had been slain and overthrown by the Picts, together with all the flower of his army."¹⁹ In this passage Eddius is telling the story of Bishop

Wilfrid's return to Northumbria after the death of Ecgrith. Until of the year 686, Wilfrid had been living as an exile, due to Ecgrith's expulsion of him from the kingdom of Northumbria. This reinstatement of Bishop Wilfrid would have been most displeasing to the fallen King Ecgrith, because he detested Wilfrid. However, Ecgrith's brother and successor, Aldfrith, obviously did not share his brother's contempt for the much loved bishop. From this passage in Eddius, it seems as though, not only the king lost his life, but a substantial number of his army. Therefore, we began to get a clearer picture of just how badly the Northumbrians were defeated by the Picts. The number of men that Ecgrith took with him into battle is not known, therefore, the casualties remain unknown as well.

Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, written around the year 721,²⁰ is very similar to that of the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, written by a Lindisfarne monk in that it is centered around the vision St. Cuthbert had about the outcome of the battle. Bede writes:

Now when King Ecgrith, rashly daring, had taken an army against the Picts and was devastating their kingdoms with cruel and savage ferocity, Cuthbert the man of God knew that the time was at hand concerning which he had prophesied a year before to the king's sister, declaring when she asked him that he would not live more than another year.²¹

Interestingly, Bede, at the close of Chapter 27 of his *Life*, adds that on the Monday after the battle had taken place:

... one arrived who had fled from the fight and explained by his sad story the mysterious prophesies of the man of God. And it was proved that on the very day and at the very hour when it was revealed to the man of God, standing by the fountain, the king was laid low by the sword of the enemy and his bodyguard slain around him.²²

Alcock suggests that it is apparent from Bede's writing, that King Ecgrith was killed as a result of the death of his bodyguard, not the other way around, as he says, which resembles a supposed Germanic custom where the bodyguard follows their leader in death.²³ In regard to the evidently large number of Northumbrians

slain at the battle, Alcock says: “there was little that an army, more than fifty-miles (as a crow flies) from friendly territory, could do but stand, and fight, and die as honourably as possible. The Picts had a twelve-year old score to settle, and only a fool or a coward would have expected mercy.”²⁴

It is from the English writer Symeon of Durham, in his *Libellus De Exordio*, written in the early twelfth century, that we get the name of the battle as the Northumbrians probably referred to it, which is *Nechtansmere*. Symeon records that:

In the very year that he had had Cuthbert ordained bishop and in fulfillment of this venerable father’s prophecy, King Ecgrith was killed with most of the forces he was leading to lay waste the land of the Picts at a place called *Nechtansmere* (that is Nechtan’s water) on 20 May in the fifteenth year of his reign, and his body was buried on Iona, the island of Columba.²⁵

The name Nechtansmere is commonly used today when referring to the battle that took place between the Pictish King Bridei and the Northumbrian forces of King Ecgrith.

The political and ecclesiastical implications of the battle are demonstrated most clearly in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in 731.²⁶ Bede tells us that as a result of the battle the Picts, the Scots, living in northern Britain, and even some of the Britons were able to regain some of the territory, as well as their freedom, which they had formerly lost to the Northumbrians. We also learn from Bede that the Northumbrians were left in a deplorable state after the battle and that many of them were captured by the Picts and made to be slaves. As for the implications the battle had on the ecclesiastical affairs of the Northumbrians, it seems that the Picts expelled a Northumbrian Bishop by the name of Trumwine, who presided over the see at Abercorn. Bede says that Abercorn “was in English territory but close to the firth which divides the lands of the English from that of the Picts.”²⁷ Graeme Cruickshank says that the see of Abercorn, also called Aebbercurnig, “was situated some three miles west of the modern burgh of Queensferry.”²⁸ Cruickshank also points out that it is strange that Abercorn was located south of the Firth of the Forth, because the Northumbrians controlled territory further to the north. As a solution to this unusual circumstance,

Cruickshank offers a reasonable assessment for the geographic placement of the monastery at Abercorn to the south of the Firth of Forth: “The solution may be that Trumwine had a two-fold mission: to cater for the spiritual needs of those south of the Firth in what Bede termed “the English region”, the northernmost part of Northumbria proper, and also to bring within his flock those to the north of the Firth for as far as it was practical to go.”²⁹ Therefore, it appears that the expulsion of Trumwine also meant that the Picts took back their territory as far as the south of the Firth of Forth, which had been previously lost to the Northumbrians. However, the northern-most of the Northumbrian peoples also, it would seem, lost their spiritual direction, which was offered at Abercorn, thus dealing an ecclesiastical blow to the Northumbrians.

From Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* also comes a piece of the Pictish military tactics that were used in the battle, of which he says, “The enemy feigned flight and lured the king into some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains.”³⁰ According to Cruickshank, Ecgrith led his army up through Strathmore, after they probably stopped over at Din Eidyn, modern day Edinburgh, before making the final stretch of their ill-fated journey. Strathmore lies between the mountains regions known as the Grampians and the Sidlaws.³¹ Peter Marren’s outline of Ecgrith’s route to the battle is in agreement with Cruickshank’s. Marren says of Ecgrith: “Thus we can imagine the impatient king setting out with his war-band from Edinburgh of Abercorn as the return of spring beckoned in a new campaigning season.”³² Marren then makes the point that Ecgrith’s troops may have been smaller in number than usual because several members of his army would still probably have been occupied in Ireland, as a result of the king’s 684 campaign,³³ an oversight that probably cost Ecgrith his life. Cruickshank then raises the question of why did Ecgrith deviate from the path and go into Dunnichen?³⁴ This is perhaps where Bede’s remark about the Picts pretending to flee from the Northumbrians comes into use. Bridei, being the cunning and evidently patient man he was, lured Ecgrith into territory that he was familiar with, but perhaps Ecgrith was not. Cruickshank says that Pictland during the time of the battle was heavily forested, “which would have provided excellent cover for the sniping activities of Pictish archers.”³⁵ When the

Northumbrians entered through the mountain pass, probably from the north, chasing their enemy, they soon encountered a force of Picts, prepared for battle. Cruickshank then suggests that more of the Pictish soldiers surrounded the Northumbrians from the north, closing the mountain pass they had come through.³⁶ Therefore, facing the Picts at the base of Dunnichen Hill and the Picts that had just closed in behind them, the Northumbrians had no choice but to stand and fight, because Nechtan's Mire stood as another barrier. A mire that Cruickshank claims "soon became a watery grave" for many of the Northumbrian forces.³⁷ Therefore, if the Northumbrian soldiers were not killed at the hand of a Pictish soldier, then they were probably drowned in the swampy marsh land that lay at the bottom of the mountain. At the battle site of the Battle of Dunnichen is a small pond that are the remains of the giant mire that once drank the blood of so many Northumbrians.

CONCLUSION

After reading the ancient-medieval sources that write about the Battle of Dunnichen, it is clear that the battle is an important event in the history of the Picts, and therefore in the history of Scotland. The years prior to 685, had been difficult ones for the Picts, because at least part of their province had fallen under the control of the Northumbrian kings. The Battle of Dunnichen liberated the Picts from their Northumbrian neighbors forever, allowing them finally to live at their own dictate. In King Bridei, the Picts found a king that was willing to fight for them, not simply occupy the throne as a Northumbrian puppet king, as the three previous kings had done. It also appears that Bridei and the Picts defeated the Northumbrians alone, without the aid of the Scots or the Britons. However, the Battle of Dunnichen also proved to be an important event in their history as well, since they were also freed from the Northumbrian tyranny.

No mention is made from ancient-medieval sources of tribute being extracted from the Scots or the Britons from Bridei and the Picts, so he must have expected nothing from them in return for the defeat of the treacherous King Ecgfrith. It could be plausible that if the battle was not a Pictish, Scots, and British coalition, then Bridei certainly had a guarantee of neutrality from the Scots and the Britons. However, because the Picts, Scots and the Britons had lived among each other for centuries a joint venture from the foreign invaders would not be surprising. The three groups had married and intermingled for such a long time that it would be understandable that they would align in a time of external crisis. This is not to say that they did not often squabble amongst each other on several occasions. All three groups had been oppressed and made to pay tribute to the Northumbrians for many years. This must have caused some sort of bond to occur between the three. They had all also faced the Northumbrians at different times and had all been defeated by them, so, perhaps they realized that they would have to act in concert if the enemy were ever

going to be put down.

If the Battle of Dunnichen was a joint Pictish, Scots, British operation, then it seems that the Irish analysts would have made some mention of it. Surely the writer of the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, even though it is hagiographical, would have made some mention of the involvement of at least the Irish in the battle. Bede would have certainly recorded any involvement of the Scots or the Britons in the battle, since his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is a history. Instead of the death of King Ecgrith being a consequence of the revenge of the Scots themselves, for their loss in 684, Bede writes that Ecgrith suffered defeat “at the avenging hand of God.”¹ Because the battle was a defeat for the Northumbrians it seems as if everyone would want recognition for their people, if it is deserved. It is difficult to imagine that if the Scots or the Britons aided the Picts, that they would have left the matter unrecorded. Therefore, it could be conclude that the Battle of Dunnichen was a Pictish battle that simply had positive consequences for all the peoples of the north.

The Battle of Dunnichen stands as a testimonial to the strength of the ancestors of the Highlanders. Without the leadership of King Bridei and his courageous followers, Scotland as we know it may not have existed. The battle also helped to define the Scottish/English border that remains today, a border that could have been pushed further north by the Northumbrians if they had not been stopped.

Northumbrian history began with the advent of two sixth-century Anglian kingdoms in Britain north of the Humber River. The strength and tenacity of these early kings continued to pulse through their descendants based at Bamburgh for six centuries. The Anglian Northumbrian kings forged relationships with their neighbors, the Britons, Picts and Scots. Three of these early kings were powerful enough to rule as *bretwalda*, over other Anglo-Saxon kings, as well as British and Pictish kings.

These early Northumbrian leaders commanded a governmental system in which their advisory body, the *witan*, assisted. Numerous ranking positions existed, that included both political posts and social designations. As a result of King Oswald's efforts, the royal house of Bamburgh sponsored the building of the first Christian religious site in Anglian Northumbria at Lindisfarne. The ruling family continued to patronize the Northumbrian holy men,

fostering a long-term mutually beneficial relationship with the Lindisfarne community. This association continued through the centuries, as evidenced by the cooperative nature exhibited between Earl Uhtred and Bishop Ealdun in 995.²

The division of Northumberland into two distinct political entities occurred as a result of the Viking invasion of 867. After their military success, the Vikings claimed direct control of Yorkshire and rule of Northumbria as overkings. The kings and nobles from Bamburgh persisted in exerting true authority in Northumbria. In contrast, the region known as the Danelaw experienced immediate military threats and oversight by the Vikings, such as with Gunthrum, who ruled East Anglia from 879-890 with the permission of King Aelfred.

In 927, King Sigtryggr II of Yorkshire died and King Aethelstan assumed direct kingship over York. At the same time Aethelstan allowed the Northumbrian 'king' Ealdred Eadwulfing to maintain his position of leadership in the capacity of 'earl'.³ From that time the Northumbrian earldom remained an autonomous entity within England, unlike the other Anglo-Saxon earldoms.

Despite the impression the reader can get from contemporary chroniclers, the English kings relegated governmental responsibility for the region of Northumbria to the local leadership. It is imperative that one read the sources carefully, taking into account the actual people, places, and contexts attributed to the Latin terms 'Nordhymbre', 'Nordanhymbra', 'Nordanhymbrorum', and the Old English terms 'Norðanhymbra' and 'Norðhymbraland'. All too often the correct understanding of these Latin and Old English terms is Yorkshire and the people and events there. After taking this into account, the actual source references to Northumbria provide evidence for little interference from English monarchs and their officials. At the same time these sources recognize the leading Northumbrian ealdormen as witnesses on royal documents, commanding their troops of *ðegnas*, and generally overseeing their region with extreme competence.

The Norman invasion of 1066 brought a shift in the balance of power to England. William I (1066-1087) made use of loyal Anglo-Saxons where he could in his government. Where that proved unsuccessful, he appointed Normans to key leadership positions. William I tried various methods to enforce his authority in Northumberland. His political strategies included first trusting

the Yorkshire *ðegn* Copsig, then alternately working with the Bamburgh nobles and appointed Norman dukes and a Norman bishop as earl. When these intermittently failed, William I resorted to his most accomplished method of domination – warfare, thereby destroying property in hopes of annihilating the spirit of the northerners. Throughout it all, the Northumbrians exercised every chance to obliterate success for the Norman appointees. They continued to insist on self-rule, which they accomplished through the ealdormanry of Waltheof II (1072-1075).

The *Domesday Book* shows that the authority of the southern English kings over medieval northerners could not have been complete. Its records for Yorkshire include the demesne lands of King Edward the Confessor, which totaled less than the earls of Northumbria. Consequently, the earls retained lordship over more Yorkshire *ðegnas* than the kings themselves.⁴ Likewise the Bishop of Durham, the monks of St. Cuthbert and the Archbishop of York all held a large number of working or recently wasted manors which also proves that their authority in Yorkshire still mattered.

The *Domesday* survey of 1086 does not include Northumbria. Kapelle argues that the non-existence of such a survey for Northumbria underlies the lack of Norman authority over that region from 1086 to 1088.⁵ He disregards the possibility that a survey was made of that region, which has subsequently been lost, as no other regional survey suffered a similar fate. Kapelle argues compellingly for York as the farthest outpost of Anglo-Norman authority in England, based on the extant Domesday evidence.

Nonetheless, we must rely on other sources to produce a picture of the authority figures in Anglo-Norman Northumbria. The accounts provided by Symeon of Durham, Oderic Vitalis, Florence of Worcester, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* relate similar occurrences. The Northumbrians tried valiantly to elect their own earls and maintain their own forms of taxations and local government. When this proved impossible, their frustrations and fears of unjust oversight were vented through political murder and military opposition.

This book began with the story that I had heard many years ago at the Plough Inn in Forfar, Scotland. Over the years, I began examining the dynamics of power between the Northumbrian leaders, their neighboring kingdoms and the English kings. I had

found that modern scholars lean toward literal translations of the sources for the regions north of the Humber. As such, the resulting scholarship presents Northumbria as 'subdued' by the English kings from the early to mid-tenth century. Yet, it was here where I found a more contextual translation for regional terminology that references the areas of Northumberland. Consequently, the sources show that the tenth and eleventh-century Northumbrian earls were not rendered powerless by the kings of England. For the few scholars who actually do not represent the earls as mere royal officials, they only conjecture that these Northumbrians must be strong because of their mounted rebellions.⁶ The evidence and arguments presented in this book are intended to show the tenth and eleventh-century earls of Northumbria as the true authority figures in their region. Their ealdormanry tenures were not overshadowed by heavy-handed royal involvement. In no instance were the Northumbrian earls that hailed from Bamburgh appointed by an English king to their earldom, unlike the Yorkshire earls. These earls protected their population from unjust outside interference by mounting military expeditions against the offenders.

Northumbria came to be a powerful earldom positioned between two kingdoms that desired to ultimately absorb the earldom. The Scots invaded several times intending to push their southern border past Durham, after first succeeding in moving it from the Forth to the Tweed valley. The late eleventh-century English kings used their own appointees to attempt exerting royal authority over their earldom, only to have their officials exiled and murdered. In 1087, William II finally succeeded where all others had failed, and through his personal government of Northumbria; he merged the earldom's leadership and administrative system with the rest of the kingdom.

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